

# The Cycle

by Church -Caboose- Shepard

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Summary: Fighting off extinction Shepard must find the legacy left to humanity by the Forerunners. And find a way to defeat both the Reapers and the Prophet of Truth from gaining the power to destroy all sentient life in the Galaxy.

## 1. Only the Dead

**\*\*Ch 1\*\***

**\*\*Only the Dead\*\***

**\*\*Earth: Reaper Invasion\*\***

Church struggled to lift the large piece of metal that pinned his legs to the ground. He could feel the blood dripping from the back of his head. When he pressed against the wound, he felt the warm liquid push between his fingers, but seeing his red-stained hand made his vision swoop and his head feel light. Stumbling slightly, he attempted to stand up only to fall back down to the ground.

\_Need to slow down, focus\_, he thought as he scanned his immediate surroundings. \_Have to remember what happened.\_

All around him the air hung thick with the stench of death, reeking of burning flesh and metal. Skycars had crashed to the ground, and there were land-based vehicles that had been destroyed in the same wreckage, littering nearly every part of the path ahead. An occasional limb protruded here and there from the twisted metal surrounding him, bent in seemingly impossible angles.

Something nearby on the ground caught Church' eye: the body of a girl no older than six or seven. The blank stare on its face and the puddle of blood under the corpse said it was too late to save. Grimacing, he looked away, fighting to ignore the broken child, or else he risked being dragged down by pain of it all. He couldn't

worry about the dead.

Crawling over to a car, he leaned against a tire. Every part of his body ached. He shifted his weight to his other arm, only to crumple yet again. He cursed silently and gave up on trying to move, choosing instead to rest and catch his breath. Growing desperate, he tried remembering what had happened. Church rolled his head and looked up, barely making out the London skyline in the distance.

\_London.\_ \_We were headed to London when something hit us.\_

Church suddenly forced himself up, pushing every thought of the screaming pain in his arm to the back of his mind. He spotted his skycar, smashed only a few yards away from the blood-spattered spot where he was thrown as it collided with the ground. The side door was completely torn off and not a window remained intact.

Shuffling over as quickly as his body would let him, he searched the interior. He found only one seat remaining inside. All of his squad's weapons and armor, neatly packed for a future departure they would now never make, lay undisturbed. \_The other three seats must have been thrown or scattered.\_ \_Wait, where's ...\_ he thought as panic set in. He leaned out of the car and scanned the area desperately, memories of the crash abruptly materializing in his head.

\_Erin drove with him in the passenger seat. Manny sat in the back. A large beam of red light came from the sky, obliterating the vehicles instantly. Each person tensed in fear as the beam quickly tore through the traffic ahead of them. Erin attempted to dodge the relentless beam, but instead hit a skycar next to them. As the beam carved a deadly path down the road, Erin attempted to make a U-turn. She was nearly successful when the beam skimmed the right side of the vehicle, shearing off a corner of their car, while the skycar she had hit was completely incinerated. But the damage done to their vehicle caused it to fall rapidly to the ground a few dozen feet below them. When the passenger side door tore away, the car began to spin. Church flew out of the canopy before it hit the ground.\_

\_So they must be alive, oh thank God\_, he thought to himself as he searched around the vehicle for a sign of his friends. For whatever reason, Church believed they had survived the crash and must have gotten up to look for help or possibly him. Relief washed over him as he soon spotted them on the far side of a truck. Manny had his arm draped over Erin's shoulder, limping slowly. Church rushed over to them struggling through his own pain, but eager only to help his squad mates. Erin and Manny stopped as he approached, standing wide-eyed in shock. Both remained silent as Church helped carry Manny back to their skycar. They gently placed him on the front hood laying him flat as possible

"We thought you were dead," Manny said, his words choked off as he coughed up blood. "Or have \_I\_ already kicked the bucket?"

"Come on, you could never get rid of me that easy," Church said, smiling grimly. He ripped off a sleeve of his sweater, tying it around Manny's leg in a tourniquet to prevent any more blood from escaping through the massive gash on his thigh. "Erin, I keep a pack of medi-gel in the compartment on the side," he ordered.

Nodding, Erin opened the side flap revealing an emergency med-kit.

She rushed it over to Church who was able to stabilize Manny's condition. Erin leaned against the car and slid down to the ground, her hands covering her face, smearing her features with a mixture of dirt and blood. Manny passed out, and Church attempted to clean his wounds and burns. After finishing some basic first aid, Church turned to Erin. He knelt down next to her, noticing the tears she could no longer fight. Despite all the destruction in the past few minutes, this was the sight most difficult for Church to handle. He had known Erin for a long time, and she never once had been brought to tears, even after everything they had been through on Halo.

She was one of the coldest members of their N7 squad, but it fit with her occupation as a sniper. She could remain detached until she was directly engaged with some action, the stereotypical sniper personality. Yet the entire squad had taken to her in, treated her like family. Since most of them never saw or spoke with their actual relatives, that is what they were, a family. For Church himself, he always pictured the squad as the Human family he never had. That caring made the hurt worse when he saw them in pain or dead; but it was an all too familiar fate they dealt with.

That was all part of the job for their group of highly trained special force operatives. Their missions were normally covert, classified, and generally unacknowledged by Alliance brass. Nonetheless, Church still believed they did good work for the Alliance and Humanity, for that matter. He, Erin, and Manny were the only surviving members of the squad, but with Manny's tenuous condition, it looked like there may only be two left soon.

Church placed a hand on Erin's shoulders trying to comfort her, but her weeping went unabated. He tried to speak but was immediately interrupted by a deafening, mechanical roar that caused the ground to shake. Erin immediately looked up in horror towards the city as Church did the same. In their worry and efforts to help Manny and trying to regroup after the crash, they overlooked finding out what had even started this chaos in the first place. A monstrous mechanical beast loomed on the edge of the city, possessing a large body with tentacles protruding off the main segment, reminding Church of a cuttlefish. Soon, dozens of them descended from the sky attacking indiscriminately against the city. One was coming down near their position, but it flew over the road and headed straight towards London. Several smaller machines of a similar shape followed.

Church and Erin looked at each other. They both knew exactly what creatures caused this destruction and exactly what would follow. The Reapers were here and the Harvest had begun...

They both looked back towards the city, where smoke hung thick, blurring the sky. However, they could still make out the appearance of small blue-like ruptures in the atmosphere, the obvious sign of a Covenant ship exiting slipspace. Church checked his omni-tool, desperately seeking hope, but finding none. Most of the Alliance ships above Earth had been destroyed, yet a single frigate remained making a hasty exodus from the planet. It was the Normandy, broadcasting a visual to any Alliance forces still watching. His omni-tool screen then showed a single Covenant assault carrier along with several battlecruisers exiting slipspace and entering Earth's atmosphere. Strangely, not a single Reaper ship attacked them, and they proceeded without opening fire on any Reaper vessels.

\_The Covenant have found Earth,\_ thought Church dazedly. Even after all they sacrificed at the Halo, the Covenant persisted. Worse yet, it appeared as if they had made a sickening alliance with the Reapers to assist in the Harvest.

Church looked at Erin, his voice hollow. "I don't know how Shepard plans to save us, but whatever he does he'd better do it quick. Or there may not be an Earth left to save."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN:<strong>Hahahahah damn that felt good, I've been able to drastically change the first chapter and make it far better. While still showing what I wanted to in the original version. The Reapers are here and the Covenant is too. And since for some it's confusing I'll state it here, this is not the first time Church and the Alliance have met the Covenant. This is not a Self insert, nor is it a cross dimensions. The chapter here shows what will happen after the next few chapters and story arc.

For those of you new to \_The Cycle\_ the story picks up later on and starts about 4 months before the Reapers invade. This is going to be a far better story as it progresses, my skill improves, and I level up. I'll also be putting polls and be asking other questions to encourage reviews and some of these will affect the story. Right now there is a poll to pick Shep's romance on my profile.

And as always thanks for reading!

**\*\*EDIT: \*\***It has been pointed out to me that capitalizing humans and other species is incorrect. I know this. However, due to the nature of the Halo verse, species names, such as the Sangheili and San 'Shyuum, are purposely left capitalized. My only guess as to why, is that Bungie, the creators of Halo, wished to have the different species take on a more racially divided tone. Which make sense due to the large amount of alien races and their attitudes to each other, similar to the extent that the Irish "hate" the British. As such, I'm going to keep to that extent, and capitalize the names of species. I know that this may bug some people, however it bugs me more to have only certain species names capitalized and others not. Hopefully, you will understand.

## 2. War and all its Pleasures

**\*\*Ch2\*\***

**\*\*War and all its pleasures\*\***

**\*\*Earth System Alliance Space-Harvest: Covenant War\*\***

**\*\*4 months before Reaper invasion\*\***

A sudden flash of blue washed over the \_Normandy\_, as it exited the pull of the Harvest's systems mass relay. Once clear of the relay's pull, Joker activated the stealth systems; causing the air to grow warm and the hull to concede to the coldness of space. At the helm, was the always rambunctious Joker, still flying the ship as he had always done before. To his right, sat Shepard, almost sulking, furious about being dropped into combat against another mysterious

enemy. While the Reapers remained out there, still a threat never to be believed.

Once the Normandy entered the system, passing the outermost gas giant H1-42, a small fleet of Alliance ships passed them headed to the relay. Shepard watched as the vessels limped away, scarred and bruised from the small skirmish the fought over the planet's surface. Though it looked as if they had been defeated, the leading cruiser carried the remaining civilians from the colony, evacuating them all to a safer harbor.

Shepard grimaced in his seat. "Am I the only one who misses the Collectors now?" he asked, a slight hint of anger escaping his voice.

"I don't know Shepard," Said a sly Joker, attempting to lighten the depressing mood in the Normandy's cockpit. "This may actually be a challenge for you. No more walk in the park suicide missions."

Facing Joker, Shepard glared at him before saying, "Not funny," in a cold and serious tone.

"Hey couldn't hurt to try. Do you even know what we're up against here? Intel said, and I quote 'Giant squid faced monsters on shark ships'."

"Actually, Jeff, the Intel report was not so humorous," EDI, the ship's artificial intelligence, said. Her hologram appearing on the cockpits terminal.

"Yeah I know, I was just tryingâ€¦"

"To lighten the mood we got it," Shepard finished for him. "Now can I please have some peace and quiet!"

Shepard leaned back into the co-pilot seat and closed his eyes for a moment. It was less than two months ago when he had destroyed the Collector base and cut ties with Cerberus. Most of the crew, having been saved from the Collector's grasp, and his squad went their separate ways. This left Shepard with an illegal AI and a highly advanced warship with only him and Joker to run it. Even though Jack continuously offered to take her as a pirate ship, there was no real options left for him. As such, he was forced to surrender it to Alliance command. And as a reward for his loyalty, they forced him to take mandatory "shore leave" while they assessed his ties to Cerberus.

Meanwhile, the Normandy had been broken down and rebuilt by the Alliance engineers, with a few new upgrades. Somehow, EDI had been able to pose as a simple VI so as not to be decommissioned. In order for Jeff "Joker" Moreau to be left on board of the Normandy, EDI created the ruse that she would only respond to his commands. For some unfathomable reason, the Alliance allowed him to remain as the ship underwent a retrofit. Mainly because he was the only one who flew both the original Normandy and the SR-2, and the officer in charge didn't believe a crippled with Vrolik's syndrome would cause too much trouble.

Then reports from a colony world on the edge of civilized space had

been attacked, leaving the Alliance dumbfounded. Another first contact war and this time they were facing an adversary with seemingly impossible technology. So Shepard had been reinstated, mainly due to the fact that the Alliance had no other options for him, not while Admiral Hackett and Admiral Anderson prevented any possible court martial. While the rest of the fleets were mobilized, Shepard and the Normandy had been assigned reconnaissance, to see what these new aliens could do.

"Shepard, you have a transmission in the war room."

"Right, thanks EDI."

Walking out of the cockpit and onto the CIC, Shepard passed his crew walking across the deck from terminal to terminal, hurrying about their duties. Passing her station, he gave a small wave to Specialist Traynor, who had been assigned as his new Communications Specialist. The entire crew for the ship had been scraped together last minute, a sudden and impossible invasion pushing the military to quickly ready its rather mediocre force.

During his time on Earth, the Alliance had gut the entire deck, replacing several rooms and features. Mordin's lab had been turned into a conference room. The original communications room had become a massive system for compiling Alliance intel. For lack of a better term, they had begun calling it the nickname bestowed by Joker, the War Room. The entire ship had been intended for Anderson to use as his personal HQ, of course at the time, he expected to fight Reapers. When this new threat arrived Anderson went to the Citadel to gain support against this unknown enemy, in the event it escalated into a prolonged engagement.

After passing through the conference room, Shepard finally reached the War Room. He headed straight for the holographic communications terminal in the rear room. A blue shaded holographic Anderson was awaiting him.

"Shepard, I hope I'm not interrupting."

"We're still in route. Any updates, Anderson?"

Rubbing his chin, he continued in a less somber tone, "Udina and I have met with the Council; they want a better report on the situation. Frankly I don't blame them, we were completely blindsided by this. Hell we don't even know how any of their technology works."

Anderson was referring to the oddity of the alien ships and weaponry. When the colony ship in orbit over Harvest had spotted the lone alien scout ship, the crew was flabbergasted. The alien vessel had not entered through the mass relay nor had they entered through any known means of FTL. There were no readings of any element zero on the entire vessel. Causing every scientist in Alliance space to theorize exactly how their technology worked. So far the leading theories included black hole jump gates and space magic, as one rather prevalent extranet blogger had stated.

Nearly every technological advance in the past century, was only possible due to element zero physics. And yet an alien race, or races, had been able to evolve and have absolutely no trace of the

stuff.

"I'm a bit confused myself Anderson, why exactly are they attacking a colony at the edge of the galaxy? It barely had a few thousand colonists, and only a handful of civilian ships in orbit. There's no military presence, except for one garrisoned squad."

"I don't know. We had attempted a peaceful first contact scenario, standing orders were to assume aggression, but no shots were fired from our side. It appeared to be going well, the ground team at the rendezvous said first contact started off without a problem. The aliens, or what they described as 'big brown smelly apes', had cooperated. It wasn't until they began making demands for the entire planet that all hell broke loose." Anderson raised his hands in a sign of frustration, at a loss for words at the report he recounted to Shepard.

"They asked for the entire planet!? What the hell makes them so bold?"

"More advanced weaponry, greed, hell they may have just been bored."

"You don't think it could be another ploy by the Reapers?" Shepard asked, leaning against the railing for support.

This idea had never crossed the Admiral's mind; he believed Shepard about the Reapers and attempted to prepare the galaxy that continued to deny their existence. After Shepard had destroyed the collector base, Anderson assumed the Reapers would stop toying and begin their full out invasion. It was conceivable that this was just another Reaper plot. Especially considering the fact they possessed infinite patience and wouldn't stop until all advanced life in the galaxy was harvested.

Looking away in thought, Anderson hesitated before giving his answer, unsure whether or not he even had a clue. "No doesn't add up, nothing we've seen from the Prothean ruins suggest anything of this technological tier," he said, crossing his arms and staring at Shepard. "We're dealing with some other faction."

\_"Shepard, ETA is 5 minutes,"\_ Joker interrupted, over the ship's intercom.

"Good luck, Shepard. Remember we're counting on you to end this, and hopefully soon, before the Reapers arrive," Anderson said, giving a stiff salute.

"We'll have won before you know it," Shepard replied, returning the gesture.

Watching as the hologram vanished from existence, Shepard turned and started for back for the CIC. "EDI," he said aloud, passing through the War Room's terminal. "Make sure Ashley and Vega are geared up and ready."

"Affirmative, Shepard. They are heading down to the hanger bay now."

Though it took some haggling, Shepard had managed to select his own

ground team before leaving Earth. Amazingly, the committee that oversaw his reinstatement approved, reassigning Ashley Williams and James Vega to his squad. Despite their history, Ashley hadn't been keen on following Shepard's orders again, still distrusting of him for his time in Cerberus. Meanwhile, James almost jumped at the chance to assist, holding the Commander on a kind of pedestal. He had been the only one to treat Shepard with respect during his two months in custody, an act that gained Shepard's trust.

"Good, let's get this over with quickly," he grumbled, reaching the security check point that separated the War Room with the rest of the ship. Proving just how valuable the information held within was. Having passed through the security check point, Shepard stepped onto the elevator, which EDI automatically activated its descent. Upon reaching the armory, Shepard slipped into his while the new shuttle pilot, Cortez, explained the \_Normandy's\_ new systems.

"And that's pretty much it, still very much the same \_Normandy,\_ just flying Alliance colors," Cortez said, deactivating the datapad he held in his hand.

"Thanks Cortez," Shepard muttered, sliding on his helmet and grabbing one of the rifles from the locker. "You ready to roll?"

"Aye sir, about to begin pre-flight checks," he said, activating his omni-tool to look over the Kodiak's diagnostics.

Putting his rifle on his back, Shepard was surprised to hear a feminine voice appear behind him. "Well Shepard," came an annoyed and aggravated Ashley. "Didn't expect you to drop the Cerberus colors so quick," she continued, walking over from the far side of the bay.

"Ash, good to see you too," Shepard grumbled, in a dull sarcastic tone.

"The Lieutenant here was just explaining to me how the Alliance simply let you to take their most valued bird," she said with disdain, while pointing out Lt. James walking behind her.

"Sorry Commander, she insisted," James started defensively, coming up behind her.

"Can it, both of you go wait in the shuttle," Shepard ordered, snapping at both of them. Rigorous military discipline took hold, and the pair rushed over to the awaiting shuttle.

\_I honestly don't know why I bothered to bring them along,\_ Shepard mused to himself, as he walked to the Kodiak. Despite his reservations, he knew the reasons why he had decided on bring Ashley and James along. Despite everything he had fought for, everything he had sacrificed, few in the Alliance were happy to see his return from the dead all those months ago. James was the only enlisted man he knew that didn't treat him like an outsider.

\_And Ash had always been a pain, but she's still a hell of a soldier. I wouldn't want anyone else watching my back\_

Strapping into the shuttle, Shepard shouted to its pilot, "Cortez, let's hit it."



"Aye sir," he responded, activating the shuttle's engines.

The Kodiak lifted off the deck floor and flew out the now open hanger door. Awaiting them, was the mass chaos that had become the colony of Harvest.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: <strong>Please review and let me know what you think, story starts picking up in the next few chapters.

**\*\*SLIGHT SPOILERS AHEAD!\*\***

And I'm going to pick this time to explain how the time lines will work. The events here and in the next several chapters all take place before Chapter 1

>This story arc will be about the events from the first Halo game. After that is where the action really comes in. It will go through the events of Halo 2 at the start of the Reaper invasion and continue on through the story of Mass Effect 3 and Halo 3. This is my way to bridge my two favorite scify trilogies and appease my need to have a Turian vs Sangheili battle. Admit it the idea of Sangheili on the citadel would be awesome!<p>

**\*\*END SPOILERS\*\***

As always thanks for reading.

### 3. Truth

**\*\*Ch 3\*\***

**\*\*Truth\*\***

**\*\*High Charity\*\***

**\*\*23rd Age of Doubt several light years outside Human controlled space\*\***

After centuries of sleep, the AI Mendicant Bias awoke from his extended slumber. Before him, in the control center of the Forerunner Dreadnought, he saw the three misguided San 'Shyuum, the prophets and leaders of the alien alliance known as the Covenant. They had come to him, believing that the Philologist would "interpret" what he, their Oracle, believed the Covenant's actions should be. In truth, the Vice Minister of Tranquility and the Minister of Fortitude, only came as a formality. Their real goal of becoming Hierarchs, would not be accomplished by religious means, but through blackmail and deceit. The grim reality was, Mendicant Bias, the Forerunner AI they worshiped as a god, cared not of what happened to the Covenant, only that their mistake be corrected.

"For eons, I have watched. Listened to you misinterpret. This is not what you call Reclamation, this is Reclaimer!" The AI shouted at the aliens, in their own tongue.

He watched as the fools panicked unaware of their mistake. The San

'Shyuum thought the newly discovered Humans were relics of Forerunner creation. Their luminary, an object they had crafted to find Forerunner technology, had given them the symbol for Reclaimer, and they saw only relics for their greedy hands. Mendicant did whatever the AI equivalent of a chuckle was, thrilled to finally have a new purpose after centuries of isolation, and began to activate the dreadnought's engines. He cared not for the fate of High Charity, which the dreadnought powered.

The ship had long ago been captured and re-purposed by the Prophets, as a means to power their massive space station and home, High Charity. Even with little knowledge of the ship's operational capacity, the San 'Shyuum had managed to use a small fraction of the engines thrust to power the entire city. Now, the dreadnought supported every system and function that kept millions of individuals, from multiple alien species, alive and thriving. Amazingly, it had been powering the station for generations, with no sign of slowing down.

"Is heâ€¦ no, that would destroy High Charity," The Vice Minister of Tranquility stammered. "Minister, we must do something!"

Mendicant did not give the San 'Shyuum another thought. He would fix their mistake, and provide Humanity with the path the Forerunners had chosen for them. Meanwhile, deep inside the walls of the vessel, worm like creatures called Lekgolo, which tunneled through the ship in hopes of solving its many mysteries, began to die as the energy and heat ran from the engines throughout the rest of the vessel. Without any other course of action, the Lekgolo worms tried to find a way to shut down the dreadnought, lest they all be burned to cinders like their fellows.

The three San 'Shyuum sat in their floating thrones, dumbfounded as of what to do. The Philologist, the one responsible for interpreting the will of their gods through the previously dormant AI, began spewing out prayers and urged the Oracle, called that due to their belief he was a direct link to the Forerunners, to continue with its task, still naive of its true purpose. The Ministers both starred in panic, unable to find a solution to their now imminent demise. It wasn't until the Lekgolo short-circuited the AI, that the Philologist was able to overcome his awe, and disconnect Mendicant from the dreadnoughts controls, saving all of High Charity in the process. With his systems disconnected, and his power source gone, Mendicant Bias let loose one final curse before permanently being denied his redemption.

Now the room was calm, oddly silent after the panic that had just occurred. "Thisâ€¦, this changes everything. Every text and knowledge gained from the Gods about their Journey could be false. The Covenant's foundation could be based on lies," the Philologist stammered.

The Covenant alliance had been forged under the pretense that the Forerunners were gods. Gods who had left them, as their heirs, to search and discover the holy rings that allowed the Forerunners to ascend. They called this ascension, the Great Journey, and it was one that urged them to search through generations and centuries in order to reach. One that was also false, created on mistranslated technology and misguided pretenses.

"Yes, this could completely destroy everything the Covenant stands for, and utterly ruin the balance of power," The Minister of Fortitude explained. "So we must never let the knowledge here become known."

Turning aside to his companion and co-conspirator the Vice Minister of Tranquility, Fortitude spoke in a whisper, "Too much planning and work has gone into this plan, we cannot allow the Covenant to splinter now."

"I agree with you completely. However, what shall we do about the Philologist?" Tranquil asked, puzzled as to how best to silence him.

"Well we need a party of three, why don't we offer him to be our third Hierarch," Fortitude said, more as a command than a question.

"If you find it to be wise."

Facing the Philologist, Fortitude spoke "Calm yourself now, Philologist. The danger has passed."

"I know that, but what should we do of the knowledge gained here? The Gods left these 'Reclaimers' with a purpose."

"We shall keep it secret. If knowledge of what has transpired here were to become known to the masses, the power of the Prophets would be no more. So, the Vice Minister and I are willing to offer you a deal. Say the Oracle chose us to replace the Hierarchs, and we shall allow you to fill the final position, on the Covenant's High Council."

"But what of these Reclaimers?" Tranquil interjected.

"Every last one of these, Humans," He spit the word out in disgust, "shall die; we shall say they were responsible for the destruction of relics. That will justify their extinction."

"Fine then let it be done, so long as the Covenant survives," the Philologist said.

"Excellent now let us hurry there are many preparations that must begin."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Alliance Space: Harvest<strong>

\*\*4 Months before Reaper invasion\*\*

"A simple recon that's all it was supposed to be. Land on Harvest check out the ground force while the Normandy surveys the damage how hard could it be?!" Vega cursed, while he Shepard and Ashley ran from heavy enemy fire. They scurried through the streets of the small colony town trying to find somewhere to hide. Unfortunately, everywhere they turned there was another enemy awaiting them. Sprinting down the street, Shepard spotted a small building void of any enemy forces. Coming closer, they noticed it was a small apartment. It was deserted, and looked as if it had been bombed

heavily. It seemed to be a miracle that the building still stood.

Finally, they were able to duck inside a small apartment. Being able to find rest and catch their breath for a moment, seemed like a simple miracle, one that wouldn't last long. The arm of aliens that had been chasing them, now marched straight past along the streets, still assuming the squad had continued running. After a moments rest, Shepard ordered Ashley to keep an eye out while he and Vega secured the house.

After walking out of the main room, James turned to Shepard, "So Shepard, you miss the Collectors yet?"

"About as much as I miss being dead," Shepard answered coldly, "Left room is cleared."

"Huh, at least you could kill a couple of Collectors. I swear those damn face squid things never seem to go down."

"We did our recon, found out how they work and operate. Let's just try to get to the LZ in one peace," Shepard said with a sigh, "You check that closet?"

Surprised, James said, "No, I thought you did."

James and Shepard both turned towards the closet at the back of the farthest room in the house. Motioning for James to open the door, Shepard aimed his Mattock, ready to fire. Sliding open, the door showed only darkness. Shepard quickly switched on his light only to startle a small ugly ape-like alien. It jumped and squeaked placing its hands in front of its face with its only weapon, a pistol like gun with pink crystal like needles stuck to the top, pointed in the air.

Shepard hesitated, the small ugly alien looked almost innocent, as if he didn't want to kill anyone. After a mere second Shepard breathed, aimed, and clenched the trigger scoring a head-shot, instantly killing the alien. As weak as the thing looked, it could still kill. He knew this first hand, they had come across some man lying dead in the streets, two of the small ape ones danced around him shooting at his corpse in celebration. And Shepard wouldn't dare take a chance of his squad getting hit by one of those.

"Shepard, everything alright?" Ash said, hailing him over the omni-tools radio.

"Yeah just a small one that got left behind."

After ensuring the back of the apartment was void of any aliens or survivors, Shepard and James went to rejoin Ashley in the front room of the house.

They found her perched on the ground below the window, hidden from the view of the road. The glass had been shattered, allowing her to keep her sniper rifle pointed outwards. "Any movement?" James asked, crouching down to join her on the ground.

"Got three scouts, the skinny ugly ones. Looks like we lost the main force though," Ashley said, pointing out the tree aliens making a

thorough search of the ruined and destroyed city.

Grimacing, Shepard came over by the door and turned to James, "Right, James contact the \_Normandy.\_ Tell Cortez he'd better be at that LZ by the time we are."

"On it."

"Think you can take out those buzzards from here Ash?" Shepard asked, raising his brow in a questioning look.

"Child's play."

Resting her rifle on the window sill, Ashley aimed for the skinny head of each Jackal as they searched the wreckage on the street for any survivors. After quickly practicing moving from the first to the second and third she fired three consecutive shots with the first two hitting their marks. The third missed and hit the Jackal's shoulder. Noticing her error, she quickly adjusted and fired again, this time taking out an eye.

Noticing that his comrades were being attacked, a lone Jackal sniper began to scan the area from atop of the Human made radio tower. Quickly spotting where the shots had originated, he pulled his beam rifle to bear. Once he spotted Ashley he fired.

Ash ducked down as soon as she heard the beam hit. The sniper had missed her by a mere inch, and she didn't feel like giving it another shot.

"Sniper up top," Ashley said, reloading a fresh heat sink.

Taking a peek out the window, Shepard formulated a plan, "Right, I'll run out give it something to shoot at. Ash, take him out before he takes me out. Once he's down it's a straight shot to the LZ." Shepard gave the squad his orders and moved into position by the door. After quickly opening, it he sprinted out and ran for the nearest cover, a sky-car that had fallen and crashed into a street light. As he fell the ground and skid behind the car, he heard the familiar crackle that followed his shields failing.

Ash watched as Shepard quickly ran out of the door, before she began to aim for the sniper. After a mere moment, she spotted him and zoomed in on his head. The sniper had his eyes set on Shepard, and tried to aim up a shot as he dove for the wall. Seeing his prey might get away, the sniper hastily fired, right before an accelerated bullet punched through his skull.

Sprinting out of the apartment, James headed straight his fallen comrade.

"Commander, are you hurt?" He asked, worried

Standing, Shepard looked himself over, "Just nicked me, shields took the brunt of the force."

The shields had indeed protected him from the blunt of the damage, however, Shepard's leg had a small circular burn that went through most of the armor. The only actual injury, was a small minor burn wound on his calf.

"Should be fine so long as I don't get hit again. Where are we on the pick up?"

"Cortez found a field a few klicks away," James said, while checking the map on his omni-tool.

"Alright let's move it before we have any more come looking."

The two began moving through the debris on the road, as Ash jogged to catch up. Walking in complete silence, they focused solely on getting to their extraction point. Luckily, they were able to go down several blocks without running into any more of the alien infantry. Unfortunately, they were unable to find any survivors either. After avoiding the first patrol group they saw since the Jackals, James spoke up.

"You know I've been thinking this attack doesn't make any sense. Why go through all this trouble to have a ground invasion when you could wipe out all the forces on this planet easily from orbit."

"He's right it doesn't make sense," Ashley said, pondering over James's remark.

"The way I see it they're probably looking for something here," James continued.

"And what would they be looking for James?" Shepard questioned having his curiosity peeked.

"I don't know, but I got a feeling command does."

Shrugging, Shepard continued walking, "Just focus on getting to the LZ, then we'll worry about conspiracies."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>High Charity<strong>

\*\*9th age of Reclamation \*\*

\*\*several light years outside Human controlled space.\*\*

Fortitude gleamed as the millions of aliens watched himself and his fellows declared High Prophets. Thousands had turned out for the ceremonies; there was even a Yanme'e, a hive like insect race, queen in attendance. At last the Covenant would be under strong leadership, his strong leadership. The lesser species would follow their will without question, and, with the Great Journey soon at hand, he would be a god.

The truth of the Humans could never be revealed. This was imperative above all else, as it would see the fall of the Covenant, and his demise. Which is why he adorned the name Truth, to remember the lies he must tell for the greater good.

\_The only thing that may pose a threat, are the Sangheili,\_ He thought to himself. \_Every other race knows obedience, but they have always been in some form of power. They will question the reason of this war eventually. Hopefully by then it will be too late.\_

The mass of life below the three prophets' balcony, began to cheer as they came into view. It seemed as if the entire space station's population was in attendance, which they probably were. Truth cleared his throat, and, knowing nearly every individual from every species in the Covenant was watching, began to talk with a cold calculated demeanor.

"The time of Doubt is over, soon the Great Journey shall commence. All of those who follow the path shall reach salvation. Those who hinder it, shall meet their end by our hand! These Humans are nothing more than a pest, their existence shall plague this galaxy no more. What relics they do hold, will return to the true inheritors of the Gods, the Prophets!"

His speech was met with thunderous applause, as almost a billion aliens and creatures on High Charity thundered their approval. This seemed to be an answer to their centuries long search. Generations of struggle would finally prevail into an eternity of bliss and salvation. All would be brought, by the will of Truth.

Truth smiled at himself, he'd given the people what they wanted. An end to all the searching that began ages ago. The Humans would burn, and this Harvest, would show them the key to unlocking how the Forerunners reached transcendence. The Great Journey was inevitable, and nothing would prevent Truth from claiming his title of God.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: EDIT: <strong>Going through the earlier chapters and editing them heavily. If you like what you see, please review. If not, tell me why through a review. Thanks as always for reading.

Coming up next on the Cycle: The Covenant begins their search for the Rings, Shepard finds out the point of their invasion. And we get to see Church and his squad from Ch 1

#### 4. Conspiracies

**\*\*Ch 4\*\***

**\*\*Conspiracies\*\***

**\*\*Alliance Space: Harvest\*\***

**\*\*4 Months before Reaper invasion\*\***

Dust cleared on an empty field, just a few meters from the city. Above Shepard and his squad, the Kodiak shuttle flew down from the heavens, ready to pick up its passengers. The flying brick flew gracefully through the air, turning sharply to have its side in sight of the squad. However, once it started its quick decent to the ground, plasma fire was immediately seen flying over it.

Behind Shepard and his squad, came dozens of alien infantry, all surrounding a large blue vehicle that charged after them. It spewed large blue plasma mortar shots at the shuttle. They came down like a gleaming meteorite, narrowly missing the squad and shuttle. Once they

had finally reached the shuttle, Cortez didn't even wait until they were seated before he quickly pulled up, just as a ball of energy burned the ground below them.

Unfortunately, their trouble wasn't over yet. There came the sound of a moaning wails, like that of a screaming banshee, as two purple plane like ships started chasing the Kodiak. Shepard actually started to worry, as he sat down in the cockpit of the Kodiak shuttle. Working furiously at the controls, Cortez maneuvered to avoid the burning hot rapid plasma fire.

"They don't give up easy do they?" James said, strapping in his seat at the back of the shuttle.

Banking right, Cortez tried to out speed the alien fighters, but to no avail. Growing desperate, he pulled the throttle towards him, pushing the ship straight up. Suddenly, he cut power to the mass effect field generator, and the shuttle dropped like a rock. James and Ashley began to scream as the view of the sky and ground started spinning out of the still open door. A moment later, and the ships appeared in front of the shuttle. With only a few dozen feet left between them and the ground, Cortez reactivated the field generator. The shuttle stopped, as if it had hit a brick wall, and then continued straight ahead. By now, the alien ships had recovered, and were trailing behind Cortez yet again.

"I don't know if I can shake them, Commander," He said, voice peaking with panic.

"I'll contact the Normandy; tell them we need some cover." Shepard said, beginning to grow agitated. He had seen one too many near death encounters for the day. After a moment of fiddling with the controls, Joker's sarcastic voice filled the cockpit.

\_"Shepard, I hope things look better on your end than ours,"\_ Joker said with his signature sneer.

"Not exactly, sending you our coordinates. We have some birds on our tail."

\_"I'll see what we can do about that,"\_ Joker said, as the communication cut out. The occupants of the shuttle all panicked as one of the fighters scored a hit with its plasma cannon. Despite his best efforts, Cortez was unable to move the shuttle from the alien's line of fire. Suddenly, one of them engaged a boost mechanism, and zipped directly in front of the Kodiak.

Banking right, the alien turned around and headed towards the shuttle. Activating the plasma cannon's locking system, the alien pilot hoped to trap the Humans between him and his wing-man. He relished the moment once his indicator turned red, indicating a lock on the target. Hesitating a moment, he savored the last few seconds, before finishing the easy kill. However, he was stopped by a sudden explosion that destroyed him, and his shuttle. His wing-man quickly followed, and the Normandy SR-2 emerged from the clouds Thanix Cannon bulging from underneath.

"Damn good save, Joker. You had me worried for a sec." Shepard said, smiling for the first time that day.



Matching the Normandy's speed and trajectory, Cortez initiated the docking procedures. After landing safely in the cargo bay, the exhausted squad stepped out and headed for the elevator for a much needed rest. Meanwhile, after stepping out of his ship, Cortes started assessing the damage done to his shuttle. It would take him weeks to repair, and even then, there would still be visible burns on the side. Luckily, there wasn't any major damage.

"I don't know who these guys are but they sure as hell know how to fly," Cortez muttered to himself.

"Don't worry about it, slap on a new paint job and it'll be fine," James said slapping Cortez on the back laughing, before continuing for the elevator.

Waiting for the elevator to arrive, seemed like a godsend for the squad. At last a chance to rest and just wait. Once it arrived, James and Ashley pressed the button for the crew deck. After waiting for his comrades to disembark, Shepard headed to the CIC. The ride up was calm and relaxing, it was rare that he ever had a moment alone. And his normal elevator rides seemed to be the only chance he had.

Once it had stopped moving, Shepard stepped off the elevator onto the second deck, and headed directly for the war room. Again he passed crewmen running about their duties, all in a slight panic after Joker's combat flying. Upon reaching the communication terminal in the back of the war room, a holographic version of Admiral Anderson appeared.

"Anderson," Shepard said calm.

"Shepard I hope you have some good news."

"I'm having EDI send you all the data we've retrieved. Though I'm not sure how much help it will be."

EDI's voice carried out through the room, being heard by both Anderson and Shepard, "We've been able to uncover they are some sort of religious alliance of several different species. The best translation I can come up for their name is, the Covenant. I've been able to obtain specifics on most of the species that compromise their structure."

Baffled, Anderson asked "How many alien races are there?"

"Six different species have been seen in combat, but they may be led by some other race. The intercepted communications said something about 'Hierarchs'."

"I'll have EDI send you, and the Council, everything we have on the aliens and their ships. Any word on whether or not we have their fleets?"

"Yes, they're actually helping us this time." Anderson said with a hint of annoyance in his voice. "We're expecting their ships to help defend key relays and provide some additional basic support. Not sure how much help that may be, considering this 'Covenant' may not even know how to use Relays."

"Well that's a first, why would they help us with this but not the

Collectors?" Shepard inquired, puzzled of the Council's motives.

"When our colonies were first disappearing, it was a mystery as to who was responsible. At the time only rumors about the Collectors arose, we had no proof of any sort of disappearance other than the lack of people. This Covenant wasn't quiet, they didn't even attempt to hide. They came right at us, and they aren't taking prisoners like the Collectors. According to your reports, and several others, they've begun to destroy the planet entirely."

"That's something I wanted to ask you, Anderson. According to the orbital drone scans, they're focusing their military somewhere in the western hemisphere. That's the opposite side from any population centers or valued targets."

Looking down in a slightly shameful manner, Anderson continued, "Yes I may have a reason for that. Soon after we received word of the Covenant's arrival I was informed of some sort of highly classified project occurring on the planet's surface."

"What type of project?"

"I don't know. There were only a handful of individuals who knew about it. All I know is that there is a base over some sort of ancient alien ruin." Anderson continued to explain while a holographic map of Harvest appeared next to him. It zoomed in on the continent in the western hemisphere. It continued into some flat hilly terrain. There, in the middle of nowhere, was a group of small buildings, all with the Alliance logo on their roofs.

"What could be there that the Alliance needed to hide?"

"I don't know, Shepard, but you need to go and find out. We had contact from a squad still in the facility; we need you to pull them out along with any research there. We need to know why the Covenant want this planet so bad, and more importantly, what they want in that facility."

"Understood Anderson," Shepard said, stepping back and beginning his trek towards the door. \_Glad I didn't bother to take off the armor,\_ he thought to himself, annoyed about dropping back into combat.

Chuckling, Anderson shouted at him as he left, "Sorry, Shepard. You were growing annoyed about the shore leave." Without another word, Anderson's hologram vanished from its spot on the pedestal.

"EDI get the squad ready and in the bay, I want the Normandy to drop us off just outside the enemy's front line."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Harvest: Alliance Military Research  
Outpost<strong>

Ducking behind a wall, Church grimaced as another plasma bolt sailed past him. There was only one way into this outpost, and the aliens continuously tried pouring into it. He, and part of his squad, were the only ones left alive after the Covenant overran the outer

perimeter. All that remained was himself, Erin, Manny, and Samuel with the rest of their squad lying dead outside.

At the moment, every one of them focused their fire through the caved in metal door. Wave after wave of the small ape aliens came at them, never seeming to end. Their progress was only stalled, by their inability to crawl over the dead piled at their feet. Without much options left, Church gave the order to fall back further into the base. After traveling through a small security room, the squad came upon an elevator in the next room that led underground.

"Erin, get the elevator open, Sam cover us," Church shouted as he and Manny physically shut the door to the elevator room. Sam continued firing through the crack as the other two struggled to firmly shut the door. He fired a biotic singularity out, blocking the front hallway and preventing any more of the aliens from entering. Gasping, Church and Manny finally managed to shut the door, with a loud thud. They leaned against it to catch their breath, all of them had been fighting for hours now. Their exhaustion was only quelled by their urge to live.

"The elevator, Erin?" Church said, struggling to come over his squad mate. She sat on her knees, trying to hack the door with her omni-tool.

"We never had clearance to go past the front door, I have to go through dozens of fire walls just to open the stupid thing, and then there's the controlâ€¦"

"I don't think we have that kind of time," Sam said, pointing to a screen in the corner of the room. It was security footage that showed the room before them. They could see dozens of the small aliens pooling in, followed by the larger ones with tentacle like faces. One pulled out some sort of device, and began cutting the door with a purple plasma flame.

"Got it," exclaimed Erin as the elevator doors slid open. They all piled in as she pressed one of only two holographic buttons used for control. Immediately, the door closed and the elevator began its descent deep underground.

"This is bull-shit," Manny cursed under his breath, "They make us defend some secret bunker at the ass end of the galaxy and they don't even tell us why."

"Manny!" Church glared, wishing his subordinate would fall in line.

"No he's right Church," Sam said, coming to his defense, "For all we know these guys are trying to find lost property."

"Doesn't matter anyway, once they get down here we're all dead." Erin piped up, forcing them all into a grave silence.

Growing tired of their moment of solace, Church asked, "Were we able to get a signal out?" to no one in general. Instead, he checked his omni-tool. After several minutes of fiddling with the radio the device began to talk.

\_"This is Commander Shepard, can anyone respond?"\_

"Commander, this is Lieutenant Commander Church Reynolds. Damn are we glad to hear from you."

\_"We're on our way to your location, what's the situation?"\_

"Situation? Sir, we're fucked. There are only four of us left, and they've completely over run the base at the ground level. We were forced to retreat underground."

After a moment more of silence, Shepard responded,\_"I need you and your squad to make sure that elevator doesn't come back up until we reach it."\_

"Understood sir. You're here for a rescue right?" Church said, looking over his squad. They were in no shape to fight, in a single battle they had lost over half their squad, and far too many friends. The physical exhaustion was bearable, the realization of death was not.

There was a long pause before Shepard responded, \_"We're also here to gather intelligence, I need you to stay where you are. We'll come to you."\_

"Aye sir," the radio went dead. The mood in the elevator soured further. Manny looked pained as if he was abandoned and alone. The rest of them tried to hide their emotions, but they all showed the same face. They were forced to keep fighting after they had already lost this base. And it didn't look like they would make it home any time soon.

## 5. Forerunner

**\*\*Ch 5\*\***

**\*\*Forerunner\*\***

**\*\*Harvest: Alliance Military Base\*\***

Jumping off of the ramp for the \_Normandy's\_ shuttle bay, Shepard landed hard onto the plain like tundra. Behind him, came Ashley and James, both grunting as they hit the ground. The \_Normandy\_ bay doors closed behind them. Moving straight up, the ship flew past the clouds and back into space.

"Alright we go in, grab the data, and rescue the survivors," Shepard said, addressing his squad.

"Yeah, piece of cake," James exclaimed as he scanned the area. Moving west, they headed for the facility, still several clicks away, by foot. They had been forced to land the \_Normandy\_ far out of sight and range of any possible recon party. And Shepard wasn't willing to risk further damage to the Kodiak, not while Cortez had his watchful eye over it.

"Any idea what kind of resistance we'll run into?" Ashley asked with a crackle of fear in her voice. They had been walking for almost an hour now, the sun had been high in the sky when they landed, now it

hung close to the horizon. Luckily for them, Harvest was known for it's cool and mild climate. Making their trek just a bit easier.

Without skipping a beat, Shepard continued to walk as he answered, "Expect heavy resistance last scan showed several dozen hostiles."

"Are we getting any sort of reinforcements?! These guys aren't outfitted like your average merc group," James exclaimed.

"Alliance is still trying to prepare the fleet. This was a small colony, not enough here to risk any more lives over," Ashley answered.

Grumbling, James replied sarcastically, "Oh yeah, just risk ours tocinos instead."

They came to a stop at the top of a hill overlooking the facility. Shepard signaled for them go quiet. "Enemy up ahead, looks like they're digging in, trying to stay awhile."

Pulling out her sniper rifle, Ashley looked through her scope, marking on her omni-tool every alien she spotted. All of them were located in the front the Alliance base setting up defensive positions. There were four of the large split-jaw aliens, nicknamed Elites by James. One, with white armor and helmet decorated with some red alien markings, was barking orders towards his lackeys. The three lower ranking Elites, who wore less eccentric armor making them look more stream-lined similar to a shark, were carrying their fallen brethren to an awaiting drop ship. They had already thrown the Human bodies into a large pile that, one of the small ape like aliens, was attempting to burn.

"Huh looks like we have something in common. They're taking away their dead, at least they're not completely heartless." James muttered, noticing their pained expressions over their fallen comrades.

"According to EDI's scans, they have two hearts," Ashley said, motioning towards the large split jawed aliens

They turned and watched as two circular platforms were raised up on some sort of anti-gravity lift. The platforms were purple and doughnut shaped, with a large hole in the middle that allowed one to float up safely and walk straight on top. After they were raised, the small bird like aliens, stepped onto the bright blue beam that anchored the platform to the ground. Once they entered into its field, the aliens floated up, almost majestically, before stepping onto the floating platform. The smaller, ape like aliens, carried large turret like weapons, to where ever the leading Elite told them to.

Taking one last look on the ground, Shepard turned to his squad, "Alright, Ash try and take out as many possible from back here. James lets go give them hell."

"About damn time we went on the offensive," James muttered, sliding down the hill following Shepard. Scooting into a comfortable prone position, Ashley set up her rifle, and aimed at the floating

platforms and their occupants.

She hesitated before shooting, waiting to ensure her squad mates had reached the base of the hill undetected. Aiming at the first bird alien, she zoomed in on its head, which seemed to twitch like that of a pigeon. It had massive bulging eyes, that looked glossy through her scope, she couldn't even tell where a pupil should have been. And despite staring blankly, scanning the open area for hostiles, it never seemed to blink.

Once she noticed Shepard and James, safely hidden behind cover, she fired on the alien, puncturing straight through one of its massive eyes. Startled, the second bird jumped behind cover in his nest, before Ashley was able to aim for him. The small hairless apes began to panic, some even broke rank and ran in multiple directions, all screaming and flailing like children. However, they were immediately stopped by the lead alien, still shouting incoherent orders at his troops.

Without much hesitation, the lead alien started shouting and pointing his commands. Pointing from the platform to the hill Ashley was perched on, seemed to indicate she would have to deal with a counter sniper now. Some more of the bird creatures started to appear from inside of buildings, activating large gauntlet shields as they did so, preventing Ashley from lining up a proper shot. They started marching forward, slowly at first, in a tight formation that didn't allow for Ashley to have any openings to fire. Every remaining alien without an order, jumped into cover, either behind purple containers or large rocks that took up most of the outside space of the facility's outside courtyard.

Moving forward, the aliens with the gauntlet shields were surprised when Shepard and James opened fire on them, causing their formation to falter and their numbers to dwindle. With the combined fire from their assault rifles, and Ashley's sniper fire, they were able to stop any of them from reaching proper cover. Attempting to save his allies, one of the Elites charged up behind his fellows, all retreating from the hail of bullets. Firing a weapon from his hip, the alien gargled an unintelligible word, before backing up to safety. The weapon he fired, managed to have poor accuracy, every hot blue shot passed James and Shepard, not even skimming their shields.

However, the Elite was not so fortunate. By the time every gauntlet clad alien lie dead, his own shields were frail and threatening to falter from the extensive damage. Hoping to finish him quickly, James fired a carnage shot into the alien's chest, which continued right through him leaving a decent sized hole. It continued on, hitting one of the smaller ape aliens in the process, killing him as well.

The two Humans waiting directly next to them, proved enough to send the others into a instinctual fear. By now, the rest of the aliens had recovered from their initial shock. Continuing uninterrupted, Ashley fired on any alien that had managed to stick its head up long enough, making sure too fire a shot or two at the sniper on the platform, keeping him pinned behind cover. By now, the only aliens remaining were three of the Elites, and a handful of the smaller ones, all scurrying over their dead fellows. However, now they seemed to be regrouping, firing together in a set coordination. Now it was Shepard and James who were forced to stay and hide behind cover. With

every turn around to fire, their shields would drop from the intense blue plasma, or pink crystals that were fired.

Shepard and James continued to stick their heads out of cover and fire at the aliens, they were never able to get more than a few shots off at a time, but they managed to prevent any more from advancing to them. Growing impatient with the alien sniper's insistence on remaining hidden, Ashley held her fire for a moment, hoping to lure him out for a shot. Stupidly, the alien stuck out its head, jerking and twisting it to search the hill for his attacker. As soon as he saw a suspicious shadow in the distance, a bright flash quickly ended any thought of attack he had. Now the alien lie dead in his nest. She now focused on the smaller aliens using plasma turrets, but, due to their position behind containers and cover, she could do nothing. Only able to shoot at their feet, startling them briefly. However, it was enough for Shepard and James to gain a clear shot at them without return fire.

"Ever get tired of this?" James asked, pulling back into cover for his shields to recharge and to slap another clip into his rifle. He was forced to shout to be heard, "Cause I sure as hell don't!" Leaning out of cover, he started to unload his avenger. An Elite had jumped out of cover and attempted to rush them, firing his single handed weapon as he did so. Firing a carnage shot, James was only able to cause the alien to stagger backwards. Unloading their clips, Shepard and James fired everything they had hoping to take the alien down before he could recover. Finally activating his disruptor ammo, Shepard was able to drop the shields much faster compared to the others. With his shield down, Jame's incendiary ammo caused the alien to grovel in pain as he burst into flames.

With most of his troops now dead or dying, the alien leader began to panic. They had been preparing for retaliation, but none of them expected there to be anyone left alive on the planet, aside from themselves. These Humans were clearly trickier than the Covenant had anticipated. Looking to his last remaining ally, another minor Elite, the leader formulated a plan. It was his kinds way of life, to die an honorable death in battle. Honor was clearly something they had lacked for this battle; they had cowered behind crates, leaning out to shoot, only to quickly hide again. He had feared one of these Humans would have been wielding that demonic blue power that could move and incapacitate large groups of soldiers. He had found only a few of their military units to posses this power; these humans had no such abilities. Growing confident that the two of them could easily charge the Humans the leader ordered his ally to charge first, and take the one with darker skin. Meanwhile, he would handle the one who wore black armor.

Jumping from their position, both Elites ran towards Shepard and James. With the Minor Elite leading, they, again, focused their fire solely on him. The Elite tried to return fire with his plasma rifle, but found after a few shots it was dead, drained of all its batter power. However, to him, It mattered not. He would easily be able to kill with his bare hands. And indeed, he intended to do so. Tossing the weapon aside, he sprinted at full speed. Knowing the alien pair would reach them, long before the shields of the first one went down, Shepard grabbed a grenade from he belt. He had faced many aliens before, but he didn't feel confident in his abilities on hand to hand combat with the aliens with two fingers and two thumbs. Activating the grenade, he chucked it at the duo. The Minor had, instinctively,

grabbed the object before it hit him, not even realizing what it was. It was a reflex, one that proved deadly. Realizing his mistake, the alien tried to toss the grenade back, as soon as it registered as to what the device was. The frag grenade exploded before the Minor could let go, causing the remainder of his shields to deplete and the shrapnel to lodge into his chest, ensuring his death. Behind him, his leader was caught in the blast, only losing half of his shield strength.

The sole surviving alien was enraged now. Pulling a small device from his belt, the Elite activated a bright and glowing sword, that seemed to fizzle the air it touched. He jumped through the smoke and debris caused by the grenade, and charged straight for Shepard. Once the alien reached Shepard, he thrust his sword straight at the Human's chest. Stopping, just mere centimeters from impaling Shepard's heart. Through his quick wit, Shepard brought his assault rifle up, just in time to catch the Elite's sword. The weapon was cut clean through, causing the rifle to break, but saving Shepard's life in the process..

"Shepard!" Ash shouted over the radio, not knowing exactly what was happening. Shepard jerked the rifle away, taking it, and the sword, and throwing them to the side. The Elite howled as he activated a small wrist mounted plasma knife, and swung his fist towards the Commander. Neither James, nor Ashley, were able to get a shot on the alien, without the possibility of hitting their own. Instinctively, Shepard brought up his right arm to block the incoming attack. Activating his omni-tool blade, Shepard clashed arms with the massively tall alien.

As the Elite forced his arm down on Shepard, forcing him to his knees, James sprang into action. Jumping on top of the Elite's back, James wrapped his arms around the alien's rather long neck. He gripped it tight as the Elite stood up, and reached back with both his hands to throw James off, nearly knocking him unconscious. Before he could turn again, Shepard was already up, and bringing his arm back for a powerful punch and stab. Right as the alien turned around, Shepard's blade cut through his abdomen, passing right through the shields, armor, and the dark gray flesh. Twisting his arm for maximum damage, Shepard caused purple blood to squirt out of the wound, slashing over his arm and shoulder. He pulled his arm back, and watched, as the Elite simply fell to the ground lifeless.

Standing back up on his own, James looked over to Shepard, "Damn, Loco. That was one hell of a move."

Deactivating his omni-blade, Shepard gave James a raised eyebrow and asked, "Are you alright, James?"

"Yeah, just a flesh wound. I should be magnifico, in a minute."

Taking him at his word, Shepard commenced his searching for a new weapon to replace his now ruined assault rifle. He looked over the battlefield, littered with bodies and alien weapons, as well as several thermal clips scattered about.

\_Well at least there's plenty to choose from,\_ he thought to himself. Moving over to a purple container, a bright purple rifle caught his attention. He had seen it used on their recon before, it seemed to



fire projectile based ammunition. Grabbing several canisters of ammunition, he activated his omni-tool to scan and identify the weapon. EDI had somehow managed to write them a program that would allow them to see the level of the power cells or ammunition left in any of the weapons, just like they would with their own.

Facing the hill, Shepard moved his hand to his mouth and talked into the radio, "Ash watch our backs we're going in the base make sure no one follows." He waved to Ashley to assure her they were alright.

After ensuring the Covenant drop ship was devoid of any live aliens, the pair headed into the Alliance base. After killing the only remaining minor alien in the base, with nothing more than a single shot to the head, they passed the first of only two rooms in the building. The majority of the facility was underground, topside there were only a few other research buildings, then there was mess hall and barracks. The main building contained only a security check point, followed by another room with an elevator.

The Covenant had been attempting to cut open the door, but to no avail. Shepard activated his omni-tool, and tried contacting the squad left stranded in the ruins. "Church! This is Commander Shepard. We've been able to clear all hostiles, we need you to unlock the door," he said in a slow and calm voice

The door's holographic lock turned green as his radio flickered to life, \_"Commander is that you?... glad ..u..."\_

Grumbling a curse to himself, Shepard contacted Ashley "There's too much interference. Ash, we may lose you while we're down there."

\_"Just be careful, I don't want to have to save both your asses."\_

"Why do you have to save my ass? I don't know if you saw, but I saved Shepard pretty good back there," James said mockingly.

\_"About time you focused on someone else's ass, other than my own. That's all you did from Earth to here, Vega," \_Ashley retorted, ruining any witty remark James had planned.

They stepped onto the elevator, after it finally reached the surface. The ruins were several hundred clicks underground. Whatever it was, it was large and very, very old. For some reason the Alliance had sought the need to keep it completely hidden, not only from the Council and general public, but to many of their own high ranking officers. This was the reason the Covenant had attacked Humanity, and Shepard sure as hell wasn't leaving without knowing what was so damn important.

After descending for nearly 10 minutes, the elevator began to slow, until it stopped upon reaching the base level. As the door slid open, they were greeted by the end of a barrel. Pulling their weapons instinctively, James and Shepard realized the rifles pointed at them, were wielded by Alliance Marines.

"It's the Commander. Lower your weapons," Church said, pushing Manny's rifle to face down. "Damn good to see you Commander, we

couldn't tell if it was you or some alien trap." Church stepped forward, holding out his hand for the Shepard's.

Holstering his carbine, Shepard shook his hand and stepped out of the elevator. They were currently located in an underground cave, with the only exit in the far back in complete darkness. There was no natural light, instead brightly lit excavation lights were scattered about the site.

"Glad to see you were able to clear them out topside, we lost a lot of good people defending this place," Church looked down to the ground in shame as he spoke.

"At least your squad made it out alive," Shepard commented, trying improve upon Church's morale.

"Some of us did anyway," Church stated, before walking towards the back of the cave. "Ruins are this way the info you want will be in the lead research lab located near the top of the tower."

"Tower? Who the hell would build that underground?" James said as he and Shepard followed suit. Church's squad followed close behind them, kicking up the heels of the others as they walked.

"Don't know doesn't look Prothean, or like any other known civilization. Probably why the Alliance kept hush hush about it." Erin said, bringing up the rear of the group leading into the cave.

"What we do know is it's old, and still has some operational power," Samuel added.

Once they passed through the darkness of the tunnel the cave immediately opened up revealing a vast wide open space. There sat an impossibly massive structure to their right. The building covered the entire width of the cave, with a single thin tower several stories high. The walls were angular in shape, with parts glowing bright with some sort of neon light at the crevices. It wasn't anything like the Covenant with their purple rounded ships, it looked almost Prothean with a simple design highlighted by the lights. Protheans, however, never made anything on this scale, and their structures were simpler, far simpler looking than this. This structure was something entirely, something much more advanced than any known civilization; it showed no sign of age or tear. It looked as if it had been built yesterday.

"Don't worry the tower has a working elevator of sorts, shouldn't be too hard to reach the top," Manny said, speaking for the first time since Shepard had met him.

"Why didn't you already have the data if you know where it is?" James questioned Church

"We didn't have the access code for the science geek's terminal," Church said, looking to Shepard. "I'm assuming you have some sort of plan for that?"

"Our AI wrote a decryption software, should be able to get through any fire wall," Shepard said, leading the group toward the structures only door. It slid open as they approached.

"Aren't AIs illegal?"

"Long story, short version Cerberus made her," James said, ending the discussion before it began.

They walked down the hall towards a floating platform. Suddenly, a mechanical drone greeted them. It was a grayish-white in color, and had two arm-like appendages with two grapple fixtures at the end of each arm, along with some sort of central head and a curved undercarriage containing a weapon.

"They won't bother you, we call 'em Sentinels. Harmless really, but they have a nasty beam that'll burn you to a crisp should you tamper with anything they don't want you to." Church said, pushing past the floating machine. "We didn't have much access down here, but according to the science geeks at the mess, hall they're supposedly friendly."

"What do you mean 'they don't want you to'?" Shepard inquired, still glancing back at the Sentinel while it did the equivalent, but remained hovering in place.

"Docs used to say they would help with the studies. Even led them to some unknown areas of the facility," Manny answered. His tone changed mockingly as if he were saying a story around a campfire. "But one day some poor curious bastard decided to look around without the Sentinels, found a locked door. Surprising, considering every other door and terminal activated with the simplest touch. So, his curiosity peaked, he decided to manually open the door. Once he touched it, every Sentinel immediately glowed red and became hostile. Two quickly cornered the doc and left him a pile of ashes, then carried on as if nothing had occurred." He continued leaning in close to Erin as he spoke, attempting to gain some kind of laugh

Erin slapped him out of her face, they both chuckled. This childish humor helped to distract them from the recent deaths plaguing all of their minds. "Orders after that were anyone coming down here didn't stray from the Sentinels path and to leave that door alone. A couple of eggheads took some tools and tried to see what was on the other side without opening the door. All they could tell was a medical lab of some kind," Sam explained, as he slapped Manny in the back of the head for acting like a child.

"Elevators just past this door sir," Church said, stepping aside to let the Commander walk through.

Once they were all in the room, and on the elevator, it began to rise, and quickly. It appeared to simply lift through thin air, faster than any elevator Shepard had been on. And this one didn't even feel as though it was moving. If it wasn't for the passing walls there would be no feeling of movement whatsoever.

"Well that's a new one," James said, leaning over the platform eyeing the ground cautiously. They reached the top in mere seconds, the top room of the tower looked as though it were a command and control center. There was a small platform in the center along with other consoles along the far wall; it reminded Shepard of the CIC on a ship. There were Alliance computers and lights scattered about showing clear signs of use. Shepard moved over to the computer

attached through a wire to the consoles. After running the encryption, he started downloading all the data he could onto his omni-tool.

"Ah damn this is so cool," James said bending over the alien console, touching the holographic buttons.

Panicking, Shepard turned to James, "Don't touch..."

Shepard stopped as the platform in the center showed a large hologram. It was a galaxy, obviously theirs, as it showed the location of Harvest. Suddenly, it zoomed into a cluster of stars several hundred light years away from any known Relay. It zoomed in further revealing some sort of system before focusing solely on a large gas giant.

"It's a map?" Erin said, questioningly.

"The question is what's at the X."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>Don't forget to please review with your complaints and or compliments!

As always thanks for reading

## 6. Almost There

**\*\*Ch 6\*\***

**\*\*Almost There\*\***

**\*\*Fleet of Particular Justice\*\***

**\*\*9th age of Reclamation\*\***

Thel 'Vadamee paced the bridge of his flagship. His fleet had arrived in the system shortly after the Jiralhanae vessel discovered it. The newly appointed High Prophets had personally ordered the destruction of any Humans on the planet, and the location of the stolen holy relics to be found, and taken from their grasp. Thel had been hand selected to lead this attack, he was monitored by a single Minor Prophet, who consistently tested him, by insisting the Fleet's main force remain back. The Prophet's reasoning was, so as to prevent any of the holy relics from being destroyed. Instead of protecting the relics, the Prophet foolishly allowed Human vessels to escape the planet, carrying survivors. Only limited glassing, the complete burning of the planet with massive plasma cannons, would occur on the Human cities. Allowing for more to escape and live.

"You are wasting my time, Prophet. If you do not allow me to deploy more forces, the Humans," Thel Vadamee spit the word out in disgust, "will seize the archives and destroy them."

There on the central platform of the massive Assault Carrier's bridge, sat the hologram of the Prophet. He was on another carrier, ensuring his orders were followed. Thel 'Vadamee had contacted him again to argue against his plan and orders.

"You may send more ground forces, but there shall be no more destruction of the planet until we uncover the nature of the holy ruins." The Prophet looked cross at his Sangheili subordinate.

"Of course, by your command, Holy One," Thel said, with an air of hatred in his voice. He cut the transmission, replacing the Prophet's hologram with that of the fleet's current position around the planet.

"How many Scarabs are still in the ship's hanger?" Thel asked the ships computer intelligence, the simple minded AI that ensured the less vital systems were operating properly.

"Three" it responded coldly.

"Excellent." He ordered for the hanger to be hailed. "Send a Scarab to the ruins, along with ground support to access the archives underground."

\_That fool of a Prophet, he will not prevent the success of this fleet.\_ Thel thought to himself as he sat in the bridge's command chair. The monitors showed the scarab being launched towards the planet along with drop ships following behind.\_ We will take control of the archives, and then focus on burning the filth off this planet.\_

**\*\*Harvest: 4 Months before Reaper invasion\*\***

The entire cave system shook, rattling the structure and everyone inside. Everyone grabbed a wall to steady themselves, until the quake subsided. Shepard checked back to his omni-tool, ensuring the download was complete, and they had the data needed. Grabbing his new carbine, he motioned for the others to follow, as he sprinted out the door. The entire group moved quickly, hurrying to the elevator.

As it began its descent, the cave rumbled again. Bracing themselves, the group crouched to avoid falling over. Finally, the platform reached the bottom, after experiencing several more shakes along the way. Once they had exited the structure, the group dashed straight for the freight elevator back to the surface. All the while, the quakes grew stronger, causing dust and debris to fall from the cave's ceiling.

Their ascension seemed to be wrought with perils. As the tremors grew stronger, the elevator began to sway to the sides. Upon reaching the surface, the group drew their weapons, as the door slid open. Ensuring the room was clear, they all sprinted outside, all the while the ground continued to shake.

\_"Shepard!" \_Ashley shouted over the radio. She could see them exiting the base, from her position on the hill overlooking it.

"I see you, tell Cortez he'd better have the shuttle ready!"

\_"We've got bigger problems," \_Ashley said, as she stood up from her prone position, and began jogging towards the group. Once she had reached them, she reached out her hand, and pointed behind them. There, they found the cause of the quakes, a massive four legged walking tank. The legs were thin at the bottom, but were covered with

purple colored armor, which covered the rest of the body as well. Atop the legs, sat a large covered platform, more bulbous in the rear. What appeared to be a its "head," looked more like a glowing eye. And attached to the bulbous rear, was a bright glowing cannon of some sort. The entire vehicle looked like liked a kind of beetle. It was moving slow each of its steps causing the ground to thud and shake.

"We got reports about those things, very tough and very mean. They called them Scarabs," Church said as he pulled out his helmet, placing it on his head. "Large AA gun in the back, the 'head' has some sort of beam weapon."

"What are your orders, sir?" Sam asked, hoping Shepard would have some sort of plan.

"We won't be able to call for evac, too risky...", Shepard spoke calmly. They only had small arms, nothing large enough to take out something that heavily armored. There remained only one option. "We may have to make a run for it unless..."

Shepard formulated a plan, the Scarab was slow, and hadn't noticed them yet. It would be another ten minutes, before it would be able to see the base clearly, and what had happened to their allies. However, the alien drop ship was still on the ground, its only occupants being a handful of dead aliens. Though, they would never be able to retreat in it, as the Scarab would most likely shoot them down, without hesitation.

"No the only way we're getting out alive is if we take that thing out."

"What! You can't be serious," James stuttered, "Look at the size of that thing!"

Manny spoke up, "He's right the only hope we have is to run like hell."

"Won't make it. That thing will catch up soon enough," Erin said, beginning to sound worried

"We take that shuttle, get in close, and take that thing down from the inside," Shepard said, heading towards the purple shuttle.

"Do you know how to fly this thing?" Church said, motioning for his squad to follow and jump in. After pushing out the small pile of carcasses, the entire group boarded the shuttle and looked for something to hold onto. Shepard walked to the cockpit, followed by Ash. Meanwhile, Church ordered Manny and Samuel on the door guns on the right and left. After settling into the large seat in the front of the ship, Shepard activated the shuttle.

"You never did answer him," Ashley muttered, taking the seat next to him.

"No need to have him worry. EDI, mind telling me how to fly this thing."

"One moment Shepard," \_EDI said as she began to scan the shuttle's controls, using Shepard's and Ashley's omni-tools. \_"I'd recommend

pressing that button."\_

Shepard's helmet display highlighted a holographic button, and, after pressing it, the ship immediately shot up. EDI continued to give Shepard instructions on the controls. After a moment, he was able to steady his flying and have total control of the drop ship. Closing the sides of the shuttle's open doors, he steadied out.

\_"The Scarab is attempting to hail you,"\_ EDI informed him, as Shepard turned the ship around to face the machine.

"Try and assure them we're friendly."

After a moment of silence, EDI responded, \_"They're allowing you to pass. However, once you leave the plotted course, they will know better."\_

"I hope your plan works here, Skipper," Ashley said, pushing against the dash to brace herself in the chair.

As Shepard approached the Scarab, he slowed the ship down, hovering just to the side of the scarab. After pausing for a moment, he dropped the side hatch allowing for the entire squad to open fire on the few unfortunate aliens standing on the top and center level. After their ambush succeeded in clearing the deck, Ashley rushed out of the cockpit and ordered everyone jumped onto the still moving Scarab. Trying to keep level, Shepard muttered to himself, "So far so good."

Unfortunately, their luck ran dry, as the Scarab stopped moving. Instead, it aimed its large AA gun directly at the Phantom. With no maneuvering room, Shepard was hit, causing the drop ship to spin out of control. Quickly, he ran to the still open doors. Holding onto the edge of the door frame, Shepard braced himself as the ship spun wildly. Suddenly, he jumped, right before the drop ship sank to the ground, barely managing to land on the upper platform.

The rest of his group was below him, on the middle deck. Sam had detached a plasma turret from the side of the Scarab, a nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnxznd was, surprisingly, able to carry it with little difficulty. Despite their initial assault, the squad still saw movement on their motion trackers. Most likely from the pilot, and whatever crew remained, on the bottom deck. After sliding down onto the left side of the ramp, that proceeded to the lower deck, Shepard motioned for Sam to go first to begin suppressing fire.

After killing only a single of the ape like aliens, Sam began walking forward; all the while firing his plasma turret to keep anything else pinned. Shepard kept only a step behind him. Once they had reached the bottom of the short ramp, he pointed for Sam to turn left, while he turned right, going behind the ramp into a very short hallway. There only remained a single Elite and his lackey left, they had their backs against a glowing wall, firing as soon as they saw the Humans. Shepard silenced the ape like alien, with only two shots from his Carbine into his chest, and a third one to his head. Sam focused his fire on the Elite, whose shields quickly dropped, causing the alien to flinch and finally die from the sustained plasma fire.

With every remaining alien on the Scarab dead, Shepard had assumed it would be out of commission. That the entire vehicle would stop, due

to lack of command. However, there were no cockpits or hatches or even a command console, and yet the Scarab started up and began to move, shaking its body as it did so. The sudden movement caused Shepard to lose his balance and fall. Picking himself back up he ordered everyone to search for survivors. Erin nearly fell off as she walked along the side towards the back. The Scarab seemed agitated now, shaking wildly, as if it were trying to remove the squad from its rear.

"EDI, how the hell do we take this thing out!"

\_"There is some shielding near the rear, it must be protecting some  
\_\_sort of power supply."\_

Rushing to the back of the tank, Shepard found Erin, leaning against the wall to steady herself. Near them, there was a red battery like device, covered with a glowing blue force field. Aiming, the two of them combined their fire, quickly causing the shield to falter. The battery quickly followed. However, the Scarab continued to toss and turn, the entire group were bracing against walls, holding on for their lives. Growing desperate, Shepard and Erin again fired at the odd power supply.

Finally, after continuous rounds of fire, the Scarab began to falter. The power supply seemed to be bleeding now. Orange worms started to fall to the floor, as the object exploded, causing the Scarab to stop and buckle to the ground.

"Move now!" Shepard ordered, as an alarm blared and lights flashed red. Everyone ran and jumped off the Scarab, running in opposite directions. Not a single one dared to look behind, as the intense heat and shock wave from the explosion blasted them all off their feet. All of them luckily survived with nothing more than a few scratches. The wrecking hull of the Scarab now sat with blue flames rising from it and a few pieces of metal fell from the sky.

"Cortez..." Shepard grunted, as he sat down on a small boulder, while the rest of his squad began to pick themselves up. After taking a moment to breathe, he continued, "Come pick us up."

Removing his helmet, Shepard wiped his hand across his head, clearing the sweat and grime away. Meanwhile, the heat and glow of the fire grew more intense, as the last bit of organic material in the machine died. He had survived and completed the mission, and, even more miraculously, been able to do it without any casualties. But every muscle and bone ached, never had he been forced to fight this hard. Not even the Collectors, had taken this much energy to defeat.

Appearing from the sky, Cortez's shuttle landed. It landed not twenty feet from where the Commander sat. The door opened and Cortez stepped out, he helped everyone else onto the shuttle all of which were as tired as Shepard. Finally Shepard stood up and began to limp to the shuttle.

"Commander, you had us all a bit worried there for a second," Cortez joked, as he assisted Shepard into a seat.

He grunted in response. Returning back to his cockpit, Cortez started



up the shuttle, beginning their return to the \_Normandy, \_still in orbit. By now, James had fallen asleep on Ashley's shoulder, who had leaned against the door, struggling to remain conscious. Manny had taken the two seats across from Shepard. Curling up into a ball, he hugged himself, moaning in pain all the while. He had been hit by some shrapnel, that only left only some bruises. Sam sat across from Shepard, with Erin asleep in his lap. He too seemed to be desperate to stay awake. Church sat in the seat next to Shepard, already working on his omni-tool, listing the dead and missing.

"I never did have the chance to thank you sir," Church said, lowering his arm and turning to Shepard. "Without you, we may have ended up dead."

Without turning to look at him, Shepard asked plainly, "How many men did you lose?"

Church sighed before he answered, not wanting to think about those he had left behind, "Three in my squad, they were good people. We were a family, only the best got in this squad. All N7s all willing to go above and beyond. Last time we lost anyone was over a year ago fighting some slavers. Erin was his replacement, she's still the greenest of us here."

"You lose people, it's one of the hardships of command. I had to leave a good friend behind, I piratically ordered him to his death. It's a pain I wouldn't wish on anyone, but still one that needs to be done," Shepard said, turning to face him.

"We've never been this badly slaughtered."

"Approaching the \_Normandy, \_ Commander," Cortez informed Shepard. After standing up, Shepard gripped the railing. Floating into the hanger, Cortez waited until the bay had repressurized, before opening the shuttle's door. Shaking the squad awake, Shepard led them all out of the bay. More than likely, they would all shower before hitting the bunks. Dragging themselves to the elevator, Cortez had to help Manny to his feet, after he had fallen over a crate of thermal clips.

Unfortunately for Shepard, there was still work to be done. So, after waiting for the others to step off to the crew deck, he continued on to the War Room. Awaiting him were Admiral Anderson's and Admiral Hackett's holograms, anxious to hear his report. Anderson had left Udina in charge of negotiating with the Council and the full extent of their support. Meanwhile he would prepare Earth while Hackett mobilized the Fleets and returned them all from previous engagements.

"Shepard, it's good to see you in one piece," Anderson said surprised, never having seen the Commander in such an exhausted state.

"Good to see you too, Anderson."

"Sorry didn't expect you to look so beaten."

"Commander, I heard you were able to get the Intel," Hackett said ending, any pleasantries.

"I did," Shepard said, nodding his head.

"And what exactly was worth all this trouble?" Hackett asked. He was one of the few who knew about the facility, but never learned more than its location.

Waiting a moment to breathe, Shepard answered calmly, "A map."

**\*\*AN:\*\*** Please leave some reviews! They're extremely helpful.

As always thank you for reading.

## 7. Halo

**\*\*Ch 7\*\***

**\*\*Halo\*\***

**\*\*In orbit above Harvest\*\***

**\*\*4 Months before Reaper invasion\*\***

Starring over Shepard, Hackett looked at him, with a smidgen of irritation in his glare. "Was that it?"

"All that was worth knowing," Shepard said, leaning over the rail in front of Hackett's hologram.

Looking through his omni-tool at the new data, Anderson asked, "What do you think our next move should be, Shepard? This system is far from any known Relay. It would take months for a ship to reach it and return."

"Which is why the Normandy should be the one to do it," Hackett answered him. "One of the fastest ships the Alliance has, and one of the few we can spare."

"You can't expect the entire crew to just sit in FTL and chase down what could be nothing," Anderson said flustered.

"That nothing started a war. The Covenant spent an unprecedented amount of resources to take this planet, for no other reason. They wanted that map, and, whatever's out there, we need to find first," Hackett said, defending himself.

Shepard interjected his opinion, "We'll find it. Whatever's there is completely alien to us. It could be the species that built the ruins, might be something to help prepare for the Reapers."

"But why the Normandy? A mission such as this, will require scientist, researchers, diplomats! Not soldiers who will be needed fighting a war," Anderson pleaded, throwing his arms to his sides in defeat.

"They'll figure out where this system is, and report back once they do. We need every available ship to begin preparing for defense. The Normandy is a scouting ship one that will be able to keep hidden," Hackett said, ending the debate.

"Then good luck to you Shepard, and Godspeed," Anderson saluted as his hologram vanished.

"Shepard, head to Elysium and get resupplied. Then find out what the hell the Covenant are after."

After nodding his head yes in response, Shepard asked, "Is there anything else, sir?"

Grabbing a data pad, Hackett continued, "We've taken the data you sent on your recon, as well as the scans EDI took from orbit, and have compiled an analysis of every species and their technology. Might be good reading, while you're in FTL."

"Send it along, I read it over," Shepard said, as Hackett's hologram vanished.

Leaning off the railing, Shepard started back to the cockpit. Still exhausted from the mission, he walked in a particularly lethargic motion. He passed through the war room, in a flurry of activity as the \_Normandy\_ tracked multiple Alliance war assets. There were reports of an unknown ship entering orbit around another colony. The report had multiple people running, as they transferred the data to other Alliance personal.

After passing through the security check point, Shepard walked through the CIC, straight to Joker in the cockpit. Allowing himself a small smirk, Shepard reminisced about how Joker had been there for him so many times before. He was the last person Shepard saw before he was spaced, and he was one of the first to volunteer to help against the Collectors. Now, there was no one else Shepard would rather have at his helm.

"So just like old times huh?" Joker said, as he piloted the \_Normandy\_ to the Mass Relay, and away from Harvest.

"Yeah, like old times," Shepard grunted, with an air of pain in his voice.

"Hey are you alright, Commander? You look exhausted," Joker turned his chair around to face Shepard. He never stood up if he could help it, the frailty of his bones, caused by Vrolik Syndrome, forced him to rarely leave the cockpit.

"You know where to go Joker, I'm going to rest. I haven't."

"You'll have plenty of time to do that, EDI said it'll take us a month and a half to get to... what's out there anyway?"

"That's what we're going to find out."

**\*\*SR2- Normandy en route to unknown location\*\***

**\*\*3 Months before Reaper invasion\*\***

Standing up from his couch, Shepard stretched his arms and yawned, dropping a datapad onto the couch as he did so. For nearly a month, he and the crew had been travelling through FTL, only stopping for discharges. Being in deep space for such a long time, tested Shepard

and his crew. Nearly a month stuck within the confines cramped ship, is enough to test any man's resolve. Luckily, they had plenty of food and water, and all systems were operating normally. EDI had insisted upon hourly checks to ensure that the \_Normandy\_ wasn't being too stressed or strained.

Fortunately, everyone was adjusting fairly well. Church's squad had integrated smoothly, and been assigned to ship maintenance, until they would be needed in combat. Meanwhile, Shepard had been focusing mainly on the Covenant's advance, everything had happened so quickly, he barely had time to pause and contemplate the situation. So, he had been keeping track of every possible sighting of the Covenant as possible. So far, they had only attacked a couple of colonies, which had been too small to warrant direct conflict. Instead, the colonists were evacuated, along with any valuable resources. The only real casualties, after Harvest, was a squad of marines, who had died protecting an evacuation point for the late arriving civilians.

Walking through his quarters to the elevator, Shepard decided to perform his normal rounds speaking to the ship's crew, before grabbing a meal, and returning to his room'

\_Terrible excuse for a meal really,\_ He thought to himself, as he hit the holographic button that brought him to deck three. \_Raw space-cow has to taste better than the slop they have. Makes me miss Garnder.\_

The doors opened revealing the, recently erected, memorial wall, listing the names of lost crew members. Walking around the corner, caused most of the crew to grow stiff in the position of attention, as one shouted, "Officer on deck," and then all saluted. Shepard put them at ease, before turning to the left towards the port observation deck. Going to the back poker room, he found James, Samuel, Manny, and Erin, along with a few other crew members, all playing a round of cards.

"Couldn't find anything better to do, James?" Shepard said, coming up behind him and crossing his arms.

"Just having a friendly game Commander. No need to worry, I won't beat them too hard," James said as he placed his cards down. Losing that round, James watched mournfully, as Erin claimed the entire pot.

"Yeah, nothing like a friendly little ass whooping," Erin said mockingly, towards James.

"Just make sure I don't hear about anything tomorrow," Shepard said, leaving them to their game. Smiling, as he searched for the rest of his crew, he thought for a moment. It felt odd to him, ever since he first took control of the original \_Normandy\_, there had always been some alien or another running around. Whether it was Liara, Thane, or Garrus, with his calibrations, there was never an all Human crew. He missed his old team mates, now more than ever.

Entering the crew quarters, Shepard found Ashley and Church sitting in chairs along the back wall, against the window showing the FTL drive.

"Everything alright with you two?" He asked, taking a third next to the pair.

"Fine actually. The Lieutenant Commander here was just telling me the most fascinating story about you."

"Oh really," Shepard asked, leaning back with his arms cross, glaring towards Ashley.

"Don't get so riled up Shepard, nothing bad," Ashley said, glancing slyly towards Church, who smiled and quickly broke eye contact

"Was it the time I saved your ass on Virmire, or when we rescued you from Eden Prime?"

"No. I believe it had something to do about you trying to seduce some Asari serial killer," Church said, laughing under his breath.

"You knew about that! And it wasn't a serial killer it was an Ardat-Yakshi, much worse."

"Of course I knew about it. Do you really think Joker wouldn't tell us about any time you try to dance in a night club?" Ashley said, rolling her head in laughter.

Smiling, Shepard shook his head, in a mock attempt to act hurt. After warning Ashley of the stories he could say about her, Shepard stood up and left the two alone. Walking back into the mess hall, he grabbed a tray of dinner, and took the elevator to the CIC, to see if Traynor had any new information.

"Actually Commander, I was hoping to get your opinion on something," Traynor said, turning away from her terminal.

Placing his tray on the railing behind her, Shepard said, "Go ahead."

"I've been looking over the data the Alliance researchers gathered from the alien ruins. The scientist seemed to think that it was some kind of research lab, or data storage area. The thing is, any kind of research would have to be conducted in some kind of lab, that's true with any civilization. However, the only type of lab found, was more of a medical station, rather than an actual research station."

Perking his eyebrow, Shepard asked, "What's the question?"

"Sorry, not really a question, just an interesting observation. It occurred to me that they would most likely be studying some other alien species. Conducting medical test on it and such. Obviously, Harvest wasn't their home world, and they were, most likely, a far reaching galactic power. But there are absolutely no traces of anything worth studying anywhere near that planet. The planet itself, had no traces of any complex life, until we started raising crops there. It's far away from anything of value, it's almost as if they wanted to study something and took every precaution, so if it were to escape, it would cause very little damage."

"Do you have any hard evidence?" Shepard asked, his curiosity peaked.

"No most of it is just a theory, but EDI seems to agree."

"That would explain why a scientist was attacked trying to open the lab."

"Anyway, nothing new to report sir. I'll just go back to my work," Traynor said, as she turned around back to her terminal.

Grabbing his tray, Shepard turned around and stepped back onto the elevator. After returning to his room, he sat down at his desk to eat. Once his meal was finished, Shepard loaded up an old 20 century computer program on his terminal. It was a sci-fi game, one in which a space ship moved along the bottom of the screen, while alien ships, shaped liked insects, would swarm around and attack him.

After finishing the 5th level, Shepard paused the program for a moment. He sat back and looked at the screen, pondering over the predicament of the game's ship. It occurred to him then, that his current situation, seemed so similar to that of the game. Forced to fight an unwavering enemy, and once they were defeated, another more dangerous enemy took their place. The question, he asked himself, was if the enemies ever stop coming.

**\*\*SR-2 Normandy unknown system\*\***

**\*\*2 months before Reaper invasion\*\***

Shepard watched, in the cockpit, as the Normandy exited its long trek through FTL. The entire crew had endured a difficult journey, and now, all of them watched, eagerly awaiting the end of their journey. As Joker slowed the ship down to sub-light speeds, it shook and shuddered, showing signs of the strain it had been through. The feeling was light, but still unnerving, since the ship had, never before, taken such a long journey, without stop.

Immediately, a gas giant appeared before them, the same one shown on the map. Only a single moon, was visible from their side of the planet. Orbiting in between the planet and its moon, was something strange. A single glimmer of silver, reflected the star's light, barely visible to the Human eye. EDI's sensors were able to detect it, long before anyone actually saw it. Turning around to face the CIC, Shepard watched as the hologram in the center of the room, normally depicting the Normandy, was replaced with that of the planet and its moon.

The hologram zoomed in, magnifying the sliver seen before. The entire crew starred in astonishment, shocked at the sight before them. A massive ring, approximately 10,000 kilometers in diameter, was shown between the two heavenly bodies. The outside of the ring was metallic, with massive lights and machines running across it. On the inside it looked like a habitual planet, there were landmasses and oceans, covered in clouds.

The ring was a Halo.

"Shepard, we've got contacts. The Covenant beat us here," Joker said, immediately springing the ship into action.

"Activate the Heat Sinks, maybe they haven't found us."

"There are ships heading right for us. We need to take action." EDI's voice sounded worried and frantic. Odd, especially for an AI that had been to the center of the galaxy and back.

There were small Covenant drop ships, Phantoms, equipped with docking tubes, heading straight for the Normandy.

"They're sending a boarding party? Why the hell don't they blow us out of the sky?" Shepard asked, while thankful the Covenant had underestimated them.

"Joker, shoot them out of the water, and get us on that..." Shepard was interrupted as the ship's communication systems began to blare. After a moment of static, a transmission came through.

In perfect English, a computer generated voice said, "We are the Covenant. You have defied the sanctity of the Holy Rings with your filth. Prepare to die in our cleansing fire!"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN:<strong>AND BAM finally got that done, I wanted this to be part of Chapter 6 but I felt it would have been far too long then. So I decided to make an entire new chapter.

As always please review and tell me what you think, and thanks for reading

## 8. Touchdown

**\*\*Ch 8\*\***

**\*\*Touchdown\*\***

**\*\*Quarian Stealth Ship Ikamota: Harvest System\*\***

**\*\*2 Months before Reaper invasion\*\***

Pacing up and down the bridge of his ship, Captain Kal'El vas Ikamota looked nervously between his omni-tool, and the bridge crew's monitors. His ship, the\_ Ikamota, \_had been specifically chosen, by the Admiralty Board, to undergo an extremely high risk mission. Though the danger was immense, the reward for the mission's success, could change the fate of the Migrant Fleet for the better.

Kal'El's thoughts were brought back to reality, by his communications specialist."Captain, our boarding parties have reported in. All forces are accounted for," The comm specialist said, turning back to face his console.

Finally, the weary captain let loose the breathe he had been holding. Despite his suite's environmental control, his hot breathe had managed create a thick layer of fog on his visor. Ultimately, he ended his pacing, and took his place in the Captain's chair. The mission was proceeding exceptionally well, every docking party had managed to board without incident. This was, of course, the result of a surprise attack. The alien ship never realized his frigate was approaching, until it was already firing weapons and blocking

communications. The \_Ikamota\_ was armed to the teeth, with nearly as many weapons as a Dreadnought, packed into a ship less than half the size.

The Admiralty Board had taken a massive gamble on the success of this mission. However, after the attack on a Human colony by advanced and unknown alien species, they felt the advantages of obtaining a single Covenant vessel, outweighed any the possible risks. The technology gained from their weapons alone, would be enough to retake Rannoch, the Quarian homeworld.

As such, the \_Ikamota\_ was hand selected for the suicidal mission of finding and capturing one of the Covenant war ships. Once the Quarians had exited FTL, near the planet Harvest, they immediately activated the stealth systems, taken from the same technology used on the \_Normandy\_. The Alliance hadn't bothered to put up any fight over Harvest, due to the planet's little strategic value. Even if they had, the planet now looked barely habitable. The Covenant had completely destroyed the ground, burning the entire surface, so the planet now resembled glass. The few bodies of water Harvest possessed, had boiled away along with any foliage or life on the planet. If it hadn't been for the destruction of a garden world, the sight would have looked stunning.

Only a few ships remained in the system, a handful of the SDV-Class Heavy Corvette ships. In an attempt to better prepare their forces, the Alliance had organized and classified every known Covenant weapon, ship, and species. They had also freely shared, what little they knew, with the other Citadel races. Eventually, the Flotilla was able to intercept and decipher communications. Allowing the Admiralty board to piece together the Covenant's invasion, and their technological superiority.

The \_Ikamota\_ had waited and bided its time, waiting for a single ship to leave the formation around the planet. Fortunately, they did not have to wait long. A single Covenant Corvette, exited the orbit of Harvest, and headed out into open space, in order to make the jump to FTL. The Quarian vessel wasted no time in attacking. Opening fire immediately on the Corvette's exposed weapons systems, they were able to cripple the ship. After the Corvette's mediocre fighter force had been dealt with, Kal'El ordered the boarding parties to take the ship, while damaging it as little as possible.

"Are their communications still being blocked?" Kal 'El asked the comm officer.

"Aye sir, no reinforcements have arrived yet. With luck the vessel will be ours in a matter of hours."

"Then may the ancestors watch over us all."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Fleet of Particular Justice<strong>

\*\*9th Age of Reclamation\*\*

Standing aboard the bridge of his flagship, Thel 'Vadamee starred at the holographic representation of the Halo system, showing every ship, planet, and heavenly body within the ship's sensors. The Humans



had fled their own system like cowards, leaving the holy ruins for the Covenant to find. After seizing the data stored there, the High Prophets ordered Thel, and his fleet, to pursue the Humans and discover what they were after. The fleet arrived in the system, amazed as to what they found. One of the Holy Rings, responsible for the ascension of their gods, and the object that would usher in the Great Journey.

The Prophet's words had proven true. Currently, every available ship was heading towards the system, and the Fleet of Particular Justice had begun forming a defensive perimeter. Soon every Covenant ship and High Charity would be present, at long last the Covenant's searching would finally prevail.

However when the Human vessel was shown entering the system, Thel immediately took action. Ordering every available ship in his fleet to block the ships path and destroy it. He was stopped only by the Minor Prophet who had ordered that boarding parties be sent aboard as plasma weaponry may damage the ring.

"You have again proven me wrong Prophet," Thel snarled directly to the San 'Shyuum sitting on his bridge, "it is possible for someone to be this incredibly foolish."

"I care not for you opinion, Fleetmaster, ensure my orders are enforce," The Prophet turned around from Thel waving his hand and commanding him like a simple Unggoy.

Thel snarled as he went to issue the commands. Under any other circumstances the Prophet's disrespect and shameful leading would have persuaded Thel to simply gut him. However the Hierarchs had purposefully selected the Minor for this fleet.

"I am beginning to question why the Hierarchs chose you for this most important of tasks," Thel said attempting to change the Prophet's tone towards him.

"Such questioning is that of a Heretic, I suggest you stow your thoughts. Lest I inform the Hierarchs you are unfit to command this Fleet," The Prophet spun around and glared with as if to intimidate the much larger Sangheili warrior. Instead he was surprised to find Thel standing directly behind him his height giving all the intimidation he required.

"And I suggest you hold your tongue while on my vessel, Minor Prophet," Thel said emphasizing the minor in the title. "Send an order to all ships, hold position until the boarding parties have dispatched the Humans from their ship."

He leaned down towards the Prophet so as to be heard by him alone. "Should this fleet's success be put in jeopardy by you, not even the Gods themselves will be able to stop my blade."

**\*\*Normandy\*\***

Warnings blared and sirens wailed as the crew hurried to their stations, awaiting Shepard's commands. Weapons were already being brought up from the hanger, and passed around the crew. His squad, along with Church's group, were geared and awaiting on standby,

prepared to rush wherever the Covenant decided to board. Shepard had just managed to put on his armor before, running back into the cockpit. The Phantoms appeared to be having a difficult time attempting to board, proven more challenging by Joker's piloting and the GARDIAN lasers.

"EDI sit rep," Shepard said stepping into the cockpit and placing on his helmet.

"Our GARDIAN defenses are holding off any ship within range, but it's only a matter of time before there are too many to keep track of. Shepard, should the Covenant board this ship, they will not take prisoners."

"Missing the Collectors already," Joker muttered as his hands flew across the cockpit's controls.

The ship shook, as another near miss from the Phantoms, skidded over their rear hull. They were attempting to slow the Normandy down, by destroying the engines, before taking the risk of latching on to board. The kinetic shields were able to defend against their, relatively, small plasma fire, but holes were starting to appear in the armor.

"Joker, get us down on that ring," Shepard said, bracing himself on the back of the seat as the Normandy accelerated.

"On it," Joker said, pushing the Normandy's engines to their brink, as they came under more fire.

"Shepard, the cargo bay has been breached and is venting atmosphere. They've found a way inside." EDI sounded increasingly worried, as she relayed the information to him.

Running quickly to the elevator, Shepard contacted his squad, warning them of the trouble on the lowest deck. After waiting, for what seemed like an eternity, he stepped onto the elevator, immediately pressing the button for it to descend to deck five.

Fate of my ship and crew on the line, and I still need to wait on the damn elevator.

Pulling out his Mattock, Shepard slapped a fresh thermal clip into it, going over the weapon one more time as he did so. He still carried the Carbine, taken from Harvest, but chose to use its limited ammo sparingly. After a moment longer, the doors opened, and the little air that was in the elevator, was immediately shoved out. The Phantom had managed to blow a hole along the port wall. The deployed infantry poured out of the special docking tube attached to the drop ship. They consisted of several Grunts, Jackals, and a few Elites. The Normandy's mass effect field was down now, along with the ship's shields. Preventing the gaping hole from being sealed, and allowing all the air to escape into the vacuum of space.

Despite all of the gunfire and plasma rounds, the room was completely silent. Shepard was only able to hear his breath, which became more and more frantic by the minute. Once the doors opened, Shepard sprinted to the nearest cover he could find, the terminal near the elevator. He found Ashley opposite him, firing furiously with her Typhoon, suppressing the Grunts and Jackals. The rest of the squad,

consisting of James, Church, Erin, Manny, and Samel, was scattered around the bay, using crates and containers for cover, while the Covenant took up the center of the bay.

"Do we have any heavy weapons?" Shepard shouted into his helmet's radio.

Samuel replied, by heaving a M60-Hydra off his back, and waving it at Shepard. Nodding in acknowledgement to him, Shepard jumped out of cover, and rushed to the large container Samuel was using as cover. Narrowly avoiding plasma fire, he slammed into the crate, right next to Sam, pushing it forward ever so slightly. After regaining focus, for a brief moment, he leaned out and fired off a clip at a couple of Grunts.

Turning back he looked to Sam, slapping a fresh clip into his rifle as he did so. Activating his radio, Shepard was stopped from speaking suddenly, by EDI.

"Shepard, they're fighter escorts have breached the hull on deck three. Covenant forces are beginning to board."

"Send a strike force and have the defenses focus solely on the drop ships." He looked back to Ash, still using the Typhoon to keep the aliens pinned. "Ash get up the elevator and clear out deck three, James and Church follow and assist."

Flashing signals of acknowledgement, Church and James ran and slid over the console. Standing up, Ashley started walking backwards, to the still open elevator. Church and James reached it first and turned around to cover her. Once Ashley was sure her comrades were in safe and covering her, she turned around, and ran to the elevator, pushing the button for deck three.

Shepard watched the doors close, before focusing again on the fight at hand. Sam was still leaned out of cover, firing on the aliens with his pistol, until Shepard pulled him back to cover. Manny and Erin continued their endless stream of fire, knocking out one of the Elite's shields. Once his barrier was down, the Elite roared, before grabbing a plasma grenade. With bullets punching through his body, the Elite was unable to throw the grenade after activating it, causing it to explode as it fell to the ground with his dead body.

"Listen carefully," Shepard said, pulling Sam in so close that his helmet nearly touched Sam's recon hood. "I'll take the Hydra, get as many Elites to freeze as you can." He looked off at Manny and Erin across the way taking cover behind the Mako. "You two draw their fire. Find me a good shot."

With that, Shepard pulled the Hydra rocket launcher off of Sam's back, almost forcefully. Turning around, Sam started hitting every Covenant he could with a stasis, using dark energy to effectively stop the Elites in their tracks. Those that had not become frozen, were focusing all of their fire on Manny and Erin, who both alternated on rolling to cover, to distract the enemies, while the other opened fire. After activating her cryo-ammo, Erin was able to literally freeze multiple Grunts and Jackals. Even with their short success, there proved to be far too many of the aliens to fight.

Shepard waited only a moment longer, before he ran to the back of the bay and ducked again behind the console. Crouching behind the console, he held down the Hydra's trigger, initiating the charging sequence. After taking a deep breath, he leaned over the terminal to aim. The Hydra would take another second to aim and target, it seemed to take an eternity.

In that second, Erin had fallen to the ground, her armor had been burned completely off on the left side of her chest, revealing charred skin. She screamed in agony, covering the wound with her flailing arms. Grabbing one of her wrist, Manny dragged her, while simultaneously firing with his free hand, to a small crate. He continued to kneel and fire, while still pulling her closer and out of harms way. She was nearly incapacitated from the pain, and held her side tightly. Her suit had created a small weak biotic field over the hole, to keep the pressure inside and prevent her from being cooked by the vacuum. Meanwhile, Sam continued to fire at the Covenant forces with his pistol and stasis attacks. He was slowing down now, and his chest was heaving as he leaned out and fired again. Exhaustion was overcoming him, due to the rapid succession biotic attacks.

Shepard saw all of this in that split second. Finally, the Hydra read green to fire.

"GET DOWN!" Shepard shouted into his radio. Watching his squad duck behind crates, Shepard saw eight rockets sail over their heads. The first four that hit the aliens, instantly killed nearly every Grunt, Jackal, and almost every frozen Elite. The next four rockets, obliterated anything still moving. One had planted itself inside an Elite's chest, killing him upon impact. Before the body reached the floor, the rocket detonated, causing organs and limbs to soar across the room.

After the final explosion, Shepard peered out over the damage. Growing more confident, he stood up, still with his weapon drawn. Sam followed behind him, while Manny carried Erin to the elevator. The room was a mess, the plasma had burned several areas and crates were beginning to melt. The rockets had completely scorched where the Covenant forces were standing, leaving only burn marks as a reminder. The entire bay was a disaster, but the ship was safe for the time being. After double checking the corners for survivors, Shepard and Sam jogged over to Manny, still struggling over Erin. Bending to his knees, Manny started performing first-aid on her wounds.

"Maybe next time you'll keep your head down," He teased at her, applying the cool medi-gel to her skin.

"Maybe next time you'll shoot better," She retorted, before grunting in pain, pushing the wall and gritting her teeth to prevent herself from screaming.

Stepping inside, Sam hit the button for deck three, Erin pulled her legs in as the door closed. Standing straight, Manny helped Erin to her feet, placing her arm around his shoulder.

"Ash, we've got the bay cleared heading up to your position, have a med team standing by," Shepard said over the radio.

Exiting the elevator, the group turned around the corner, to find the entire deck to was being used as a make shift clinic, the med-bay already overflowing with wounded. Church was shouting orders, as uninjured crew members rushed to help others. The hole that the Covenant had created, was just along the left wall. The ships mass effect fields, now functioning, prevented their air supply from thinning. Shepard removed his helmet, immediately thankful for the cool air that rushed onto his face. Church turned to see them come in, and had a table cleared for Erin. A medic ran over to help her onto the table, while Manny went to assist the others. Sam, however, stayed right next to Erin's side, never releasing the grasp he now held her hand in.

Nearly two dozen people were scattered in the med bay, and along the mess hall. The injuries consisted from slight plasma burns, to complete incineration. A few bodies were shown on the ground, with tarps covering them. A charred arm could be seen coming out of one. Shepard turned to Church, who was knelt next to an unconscious crew member, on the ground and leaning against the wall.

"What the hell happened up here?" Shepard asked, kneeling down next to him looking over the nearly dead man.

"We came up and found a fierce fire fight, nearly got shot right out the door. Must of been well twenty of them. The crew was trying to hold the deck. With their help, we were able to kill most of the bastards. We immediately started loading the injured into the medical bay, but ran out of room fast. Then we cleared the dead from the mess, and started setting up here. We've got injured all over the ship. Luckily, Joker informs me that most of the boarding parties were destroyed, before they were able to overrun us. Still a few fighters chasing us, but we're out of their range now. Ash and James are in the AI core, ensuring EDI didn't take any damage. I can't believe it, sir, but we actually survived. Aside from some minor hull breaches and a slightly overheated GARDIAN laser, the ship is in remarkably good condition."

Standing up straight, Shepard walked to the elevator, needing to find out what else happened to the ship. It pained him to not just stop and immediately help the injured, but they were receiving all the help needed at the moment, and he needed to speak with Joker.

Traveling through the elevator and CIC, Shepard reached the cockpit, and stopped just behind Joker's chair, observing all of the monitors. After a moment, Joker noticed his presence, and knew immediately that Shepard wanted a situation report, before he even had to ask. He focused less on piloting the ship now, allowing EDI to pick up the slack. Turning his chair around, Joker actually stood up, and walked with the commander to the center of the CIC.

"We got pretty damn lucky Commander. If they had sent anything bigger, we never would have made it." He leaned over a terminal, pulling up the holographic representation of the Normandy. "Got a few hull breaches on decks three, four, and five, but most of our systems are still operational. However, we lost communications."

"How many were there?" Shepard asked, looking away from the hologram and directly at Joker.

"Too many to count. We flew directly past a blockade of war ships, and not a single shot was fired."

Looking to him puzzled, Shepard asked, "Why?"

"I was too busy trying to stay alive to ask."

"How much closer to the ring structure? That has to be what they were protecting."

"EDI's gotten some info on that, and we're entering the atmosphere now." Almost on cue, the ship began to rattle, the obvious sign that it was heading to a planet's surface.

"This thing has an atmosphere?" Shepard walked back to the bridge, and was amazed by the sight in front of him. Dozens of the Sentinel like structures were following the Normandy and surrounding it, keeping close to it as it zoomed past the clouds. None of the machines were acting hostile towards them, they simply looked the ship over. As if they were curious what it was. Ahead of them, trees rushed by, going quickly out of view as the ship hurried over some sort of forest. Several rivers could be seen as breaks in the forest. Then suddenly large structures, similar to the one they found on Harvest, began to appear at different intervals. The ship began to slow down as a clearing appeared in the forest. A large structure with no signs of age, aside from a few vines growing from the side, stood in front of them, as the Normandy landed directly in front of it.

EDI's hologram suddenly appeared "This was one of the most defensible locations I could find, Shepard. It will allow us a temporary base as we repair the Normandy and search the Halo."

"I'm sorry what did you call it?"

"I forgot to inform you. Welcome Shepard, to what the Covenant have been searching centuries for,  
>Halo."<p>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN:<strong>

As always thanks for reading and please do review it does greatly help.

## 9. Chapter 9 One small step

**\*\*Ch 9\*\***

**\*\*One Small Step\*\***

**\*\*Fleet of Particular Justice\*\***

**\*\*9th Age of Reclamation\*\***

They watched in silence as the Human ship slipped past their blockade. The Prophet had forbid any action to be taken against the

ship, allowing it an easy victory. He claimed that the Humans were too close to the Halo that any weapon that fired and missed may hit the ring, and should the ship be destroyed the debris may damage the ring. Try as he might Thel's patience had worn thin.

"Fleetmaster... I," The Prophet struggled to find the words. The Sangheili stood with his back to him silent and still. He made no move or word to the Prophet and the silence had begun to worry him. Sangheili were not known for their sense of mercy or kindness.

\_No\_ he thought to himself, \_I was chosen by the Hierarchs themselves, this vermin has no power over me.\_ His thoughts gave him no more courage, when Thel finally did turn around he flinched and brought his arms up to shield his face. After a moment he opened his eyes to find Thel had already begun issuing orders to other ships. He ignored the Prophet and acted as though he no longer existed.

The Prophet's face grew sour as he realized what had occurred. His small hovering throne moved forward so to be next to Thel, as if he was still in control and the Fleetmaster gave his orders. He would not be treated with such disrespect from a lowly Sangheili.

When his presence was noticed, the Prophet immediately regretted his decision. Thel stopped issuing commands abruptly, and glared at the Prophet, over his shoulder like you would a child. In Thel's mind showing him extreme dishonor was a far worse fate than death, but that too would soon occur.

"Prophet I shall see you in the hanger. You will of course wish to view the surface yourself?" Thel turned around to face him now, his attitude surprisingly friendly. "And I shall see you there personally," his voice turned sinister and dark, as if he knew something and wished to keep it hidden.

A lump could be seen in his throat as the Prophet swallowed the growing stress away. "Contrary to your opinion Fleetmaster I am no fool. I am more than capable of embarking on my own," he said in his calmest voice despite his fear. He brushed his robes straight and turned to leave the bridge and find his way to the hanger bay. The entire Sangheili bridge crew watched intently, it was not every day one of their kind questioned a Prophet and was not branded as a heretic. Of course not a single one of them agreed with the fool of a Prophet, and all were in support of Thel 'Vadamee.

"I insist," Thel said as he lightly pushed the Prophet's chair through the doorway into a vast hallway. After a minute of traversing corridors, doors and gravity lifts they reached the bay. The only crew present were several Unggoy workers and a single Sangheili officer barking orders. Above Huragok floated harmlessly going where they pleased to ensure the ship ran smoothly.

Upon seeing them enter the Sangheili officer bowed his head in respect to both Thel and the Minor Prophet. After waving him off to continue his work Thel turned to the Prophet. He intentionally placed the Prophet between himself and the bay's plasma barrier. The barrier would allow drop ships and fighters to exit and enter, but still allowed the bay to be pressurized. Every now and again though a Unggoy would either become curious enough or stupid enough to stick a limb outside and never be seen again.

The Prophet began to panic looking back and forth for some way out of his predicament. He started floating backwards slowly as Thel began to advance, only being aware of the immediate danger that stood in front of him. The Prophet continued to grow more desperate frantically praying for his life to be spared. His eyes grew as Thel cast his shadow over him. He shrunk in his chair as his life began to flash showing every horrible mistake.

"I wondered why the Hierarchs would appoint an," Thel thought for a moment trying to determine the correct word, "inexperienced Prophet like yourself for such a vital task as this." He continued to move closer to the Prophet in complete control of the situation. He knew what to say and the response that would be given. "Perhaps their judgment was not as keen as I originally thought."

Hearing this the Prophet shouted instinctively "Heresey!" until an energy sword cut straight through his chest and out his back through the chair.

Leaning in close to the Prophet's head to ensure his final thoughts were on his grandest failure Thel whispered, "Heresey was allowing the Humans to defile a Holy Ring."

The Prophet gasped for breath, the blade had not immediately killed him only causing him to gasp as his lungs filled with blood. His eyes rolled to the back of his head as Thel leaned away from him and pulled out his sword. The Prophet continued to sit in his chair slumped over and grasping his chest in a vain attempt to breathe. After a short moment longer Thel reached with his foot and simply pushed the floating chair and its dying occupant through the barrier. The Prophet floated out of the ship feeling the immense drop in temperature and the excruciating pain associated with the vacuum of space.

"Enjoy your grave."

**\*\*Surface of Halo\*\***

**\*\*2 months before Reaper invasion\*\***

The crew had been on the surface for half a day, so far the Covenant hadn't found them. Shepard ordered for all of the ship's systems to be deactivated and only the AI core to be left on. Without EDI's assistance Shepard feared they may never survive this Halo. The crew endured cold showers and little running water, most were bringing cots out to sleep in the alien structure. They were able to set up a decent trauma center and the wounded were resting comfortably.

They had absolutely no contact with anyone outside the system, the QEC had been damaged in the boarding. Even if it were working Shepard wouldn't allow any signal to be broadcast if it might lead the Covenant to them. Knowing they may have to stay a while, Traynor had created a shift schedule for everything from sentry duty to shower limits. She was standing with Shepard in his quarters reviewing any changes that needed his authorization.

The Normandy had taken more damage than they originally thought, meaning more time was needed to make to being run nearly non stop and the extreme heat from the plasma weapons, the engine needed major retrofitting. Which required parts and time they didn't have.



"Thank you Traynor, is there anything else?"

"Um no, Commander. I'll go see if Adams has anything on our engine problem yet."

Shepard remained at his desk quietly waiting for Traynor to reach the elevator. As soon as the doors closed he smashed his fist on the desk in a fit of anger, leaving a small dent. He was furious, stranded on some alien device and fighting some incredibly powerful alien force while the Reapers were right on their doorstep. Worse they were completely in the dark, for all they knew the Reapers could have arrived and already completed the cycle. Putting everything and everyone he fought three years for in jeopardy. Far as Shepard could see they were the last of Humanity.

It didn't matter though, the Covenant would find them eventually. Even if it took them months to search the ring, they wouldn't rest until everyone of them was dead. After regaining his composure he stood up from the desk turning the single light off and deactivating anything of importance. Noticing the few fish left in his tank he fed them the remainder of their food. Frowning he realized the fish would die long before anything was accomplished.

He began calling to EDI as he walked to the elevator. After remembering every system was shut down and EDI couldn't hear him anymore he activated his omni-tool to contact Church.

"How's our FOB coming along?"

"We've gotten ourselves dug in. I put two teams to search the immediate area while we start putting up defenses."

"Good work Church, how are the wounded?"

"One thing we aren't lacking is meds. Most are resting comfortably and anyone not seriously injured is giving a hand. Our water supply however is running dangerously low."

"What happened to our filtration system?" Shepard asked puzzled.

"You'll need to talk to Adams about that."

Agitated again Shepard ended the call and waited for the elevator to reach the engineering deck. After brushing past a pair of engineers rushing up to find more tools, he headed straight for the core. He found Adams bent over his terminal, looking him over Shepard noticed Adams sweating rapidly and cursing silently under his breath.

"Commander I didn't see you..." He stopped mid sentence as the terminal flashed an error message. After slamming his hands against the console he calmed himself and wiped the sweat still accumulating on his brow.

"Sorry sir, we've just got a lot to deal with down here."

"It's fine, what exactly is the problem?"

"I'll tell you the same thing I told Traynor, the engines are too damn hot to be of any good. The FTL drive isn't looking any better either. I don't know how we were able to even get this thing to land."

"Is there anything you can do?"

"Not unless I get a miracle."

"What happened to all the water in the filtration system?"

"Ship used all the water to cool off the systems after the coolant solution failed. Standard emergency procedure."

"If there's anyone that can fix this it's you, Adams," Shepard said putting his hand on Adams' shoulder in a show of good faith.

"I'll do what I can Commander," Adams said as he returned to his work

**\*\*Quarian Stealth Ship Ikamota: Harvest System\*\***

**\*\*2 Months before Reaper invasion\*\***

Reports from the marine boarding parties were beginning to stream in to the Ikamota. They were meeting incredible resistance with several squads gone entirely. Those that remained were seeing heavy casualties, but they were taking ground. The Covenant proved they wouldn't lose a ship without a fight. Something that Kal'El couldn't help but admire, any Quarian would rather die than let one of their ships fall into enemy hands. Such an attack would threaten the safety of the flotilla.

"The first team has taken the bridge, Captain. However they're still defending it from counter attacks." The comm specialist reported, never deviating from his task.

"Have them seal the bridge and begin venting the ship."

"It will take them a moment, Alliance intel didn't have much on controlling one of their ships."

Kal'El started tapping his fingers on his chair nervously. Almost 80 percent of their landing forces were now dead, and if the ship wasn't taken soon the Ikamota's presence would be noticed by the other Covenant vessels. Time was of the essence, and each passing minute would bring the entire crew closer to death.

"Give me their exact coordinates in relation to the corridor," the Captain ordered as he stopped his fidgeting and formulated a plan.

"Aye sir,"

"Prepare a firing solution, aim one of the port Thanix cannons."

The weapons officer hesitated staring at her Captain for a moment. If they missed by an inch the marines on board could be killed along with the bridge preventing the ship from being taken. Worse their mission would be an utter failure. After another brief moment of

hesitation the officer turned back to her console. Reluctantly she typed in the firing solution and held her hand over the button for fire.

"Waiting on your order sir," she said with detectable panic in her voice.

"Captain, they've sealed the bridge but can't vent the atmosphere. The doors are already starting to falter," the comm specialist said, relaying everything the squad was reporting.

"Fire now!"

Without hesitation the weapons officer fired, placing her free hand over her face plate to avoid the damage that might ensue. The cannon blasted easily through the hull and reached the corridor just outside the bridge. Any Elite not killed on impact was immediately dragged into the vacuum of space. The Quarian marines informed them that the bridge was unscathed and they were no longer dealing with any resistance. Once the news was heard the entire crew on the Ikamota jumped with celebration cheering at the nearly complete mission. Kal'El's first officer slapped him on the back in congratulations bringing the Captain back from his moment of frozen fear.

"Captain, the second team is reporting in!" the comm specialist said shouting over the commotion. The crew immediately grew silent as the new information began to develop. "They've taken the engine room but are warning against venting the atmosphere in that sector."

"What possible reason could they have for that?"

"Sir, they've found some aliens that are..." the specialist paused for a moment. Trying to ensure that he had heard correctly.

"Well what then!"

"Sir, they're helping us."

**\*\*AN: \*\***Well this is turning out better than expected. I'm slowing down my updates so I can go back to previous chapters myself and edit anything. My beta is still unavailable, so I'll just do it myself. It provides me the chance to change a few things here and there too. Nothing that you'll NEED to go back and see. I did recently rewrite Ch 1 though and while you don't need to go back and read it I'd recommend to as it is vastly better than the original.

As always please review, I could still use suggestions on the ending. Also please check out my profile for a poll on who you would want Shep's love interest to be. Once the Mass Effect side of this story starts up I'll have polls for key decisions in that game as well.

And again thank you for reading

## 10. Chapter 10 One Giant Leap

**\*\*Ch 10\*\***

**\*\*One Giant Leap\*\***

**\*\*Normandy landing area Surface of Halo\*\***

**\*\*2 months before Reaper invasion\*\***

The air was comfortable, a breeze could be felt blowing through the forest. There wasn't a single insect or animal to be seen for miles, only the wind flowing through the trees. It was calm, the sun shining through a crystal clear sky which allowed for the opposite side of the ring to be seen easily, even from such a distance. Despite the incredible oddity that was the Halo, it still seemed remarkably Earth like.

It possessed a constant day and night cycle, with the night being several hours shorter than the day. The air was nearly a perfect mixture of Earth's atmosphere. And the temperature remained at a constant 70 degrees. If they weren't being hunted by genocidal aliens, Shepard and his crew would have enjoyed the unexpected shore leave. But as it were, there was no time for any sort of relaxation.

Three days had passed since they crashed onto the Halo, it came and went in the blink of an eye. In that time the crew had set up a formidable defense, albeit they had no access to any heavy machinery. Any crew not assigned to medical or repair was more than likely patrolling the perimeter. There was a decent seven kilometer radius between the patrols and the makeshift base. The Normandy itself had been coated with dirt and grass, in an attempt to camouflage it from enemy air patrols. So far the Normandy's surviving crew had gone unnoticed.

"Recon one, its been several hours since your last update. Everything alright Lieutenant Reynolds?" Traynor asked through her computer's radio. In a better attempt to organize, Specialist Traynor had been placed as the control for any squads on patrol. She was able to do her job remarkably well requiring only minimal assistance from EDI. Luckily the structure the entire crew was based in allowed for a remarkably strong signal despite any other interference.

\_"It's been over two months and you still insist on calling me Reynolds. I've told you Traynor call, me Church,"\_ Church said coming through Traynor's radio.

"Um sorry, what's your situation then Church."

He laughed a moment before giving his response. \_"We already sent most of the squad back with fresh water from the lake. Sam and I got a blip on the motion trackers, we're checking it out now."\_

"Roger that, just be careful Church. We don't have the resources to send a rescue party."

\_"Nah careful is never fun, much rather go find us some trouble,"\_ Sam said interjecting his thoughts.

Rolling her eyes, Traynor dropped the connection. \_Boys will be boys\_, she thought to herself. She began reviewing the other reports before packing up. They had gotten comfortable, all of them. There was an abundant amount of food still left in the Normandy's storage, and with Shepard rationing everything from thermal clips, to showers

it would last for months. Even a fresh source of water had been found and the Normandy's supply was slowing rising.

After finishing her report for Shepard, Traynor started shutting down the computer's systems. Night was falling and all the recon teams would be heading back to the temporary base.

\_"This is recon one to control! Samantha can you hear me?" \_it was Church, his voice was frantic and worried. Traynor could hear the fear even through the radio's static.

"Yes I read you, what the hell's going on?"

\_"God is your voice a relief," \_he seemed calmer now, as though his most immediate worry was contacting her. \_"We found what made our trackers ping. There was a Ghost on recon, we were able to take it out but..." \_static was again cutting through the signal causing Church to become unintelligible.

"Your signal is coming in weak. Where the hell are you?" Traynor grew more and more frantic. They all knew it was a matter of time before the Covenant were able to find them and slaughter them all. With the Normandy's engines still out of commission there was no way off the ring. Meaning when the Covenant did find them, it would be a fight to the last man.

\_"Several clicks outside the recon \_\_perimeter, we took the Ghost back down the way it came. We're en rout back to base now."\_

"Wait you took 'the Ghost'..." she was cut off abruptly before finishing her question.

\_"Long story, patch us into Shpard he's gonna need to hear this too."\_

Stumbling with the controls she connected Shepard into the conversation. Traynor was relieved to finally see his face on the screen. Despite everything that occurred, Shepard had managed to keep the crew alive. Without him the crew might not have survived Harvest, let alone this alien structure.

He was in the temporary clinic on the base floor of the structure when Traynor connected him. Any moment he could spare was spent trying to get the entire crew into better shape. It would require everyone to be at their best in order to survive. Which meant the wounded would need to be up and fighting soon.

"What is it Traynor?" Shepard asked through his omni-tool.

\_"Commander I'm patching you through to Church."\_

\_"Shepard we're coming in on a Ghost,"\_Church's voice was barely audible through the static. \_"We've been able to find the Covenant!"\_

Stunned by what he heard, Shepard froze in place. Fear had taken hold of his mind and panic started to set in. Surely if they had found the Covenant, then it was only a matter of time before they themselves were discovered. Their defenses would only hold out so long against a

ground invasion, and would do nothing against the Covenant ships. Slowly, but surely, they would face their deaths on the ring.

"What's your ETA?" Shepard asked. Despite the danger, Shepard was still able to remain levelheaded.

"They're coming in now, Commander," it was Traynor who responded. Sure enough the sound of a Ghost was heard from outside.

Pivoting towards the door, Shepard sprinted outside the structure. Ahead of him, the group of sentries were gathering around. Blocking his view of the Ghost. Pushing them aside, Shepard found Church and Sam attempting to deactivate the vehicle. The purple hull showed small scratches and a few twigs were stuck to the front wings. The entire thing seemed to shimmer with a scale like pattern on it.

Finally, after several failed attempts, they were able to power down the Ghost. The anti-gravity engines died, and the entire thing fell to the ground with a thud. Suddenly Joker appeared, gawking over the alien device.

"For me? You shouldn't have," Joker said mockingly.

"Please, the acceleration on this thing would easily cripple you," Sam laughed at his own joke. "Perhaps you should stick with your talking ship."

"Yeah, yeah make fun of the crippled who talks to robots."

"Is EDI technically considered a robot?" Church piped up the question. He was only half paying attention, but the idea of EDI as a walking machine peaked his curiosity.

Sam visibly shook, "Don't even joke about that. Bad enough we rely on it, I don't want that thing walking around with hands!"

"Hey she's not a thing! She's saved the Normandy and you on more than one occasion," Joker said defensively. Walking up to Sam, he stuck his finger in his face attempting to intimidate the soldier. Unfortunately, Sam stood a foot taller than Joker. Making the entire scene comical.

Sighing, Shepard shook his head. "I need a drink," he mumbled under his breath.

"Church Sam, meet me at Traynor's station after chow," as he spoke, Church and Sam snapped to attention. Shepard was normally lenient, when it came to military doctrine. However, due to the circumstances, he cracked down harder now on insubordination. Even Joker, who had always been quick with a joke, refrained from any out of line comments. "Dismissed."

"Sir, you really should hear this though," Church said sheepishly.

"Are we in any immediate danger?" Shepard demanded

"Um, no but..."

"Do you have anything so vitally important that I can't first grab a drink?"

"No," Church spoke flatly. His opinion of the Commander was souring by the minute.

"Then it can wait a half hour."

Sam waited until Shepard had gone out of sight before moving from attention. Once Shepard left his sight, he left Church and Joker, who were trying to find a way to reactivate the Ghost, and dashed for the med-bay in the structure. Luckily most of the injured crew were resting comfortably, the medical supplies on the Normandy were one of the few things that were in surplus. Unfortunately, not everyone had survived the Covenant's boarding parties. The first night after landing they had held a small service to honor the dead, now the only thing on any of their minds was surviving. But Shepard was right, his and Church's information would be able to wait a moment.

Once inside the clinic, Sam immediately went to the cot at the far end that held Erin. Nearly every chance he got, Sam would go and visit to ensure she was still breathing.

"Hey," she had spotted him trotting over to her. Sitting her head up, she patted her hand on the side of the cot offering him a seat.

"Hey," he responded in kind. Looking her over, he noticed the bandages across her stomach had been recently changed. The medi-gel was healing the burns nicely, and she would be fine in days. Of course his mind was still never put at ease.

"I'm fine, Sam. I really am," she smiled at him. "You don't have to keep checking up on me."

"I know, but if I don't who will?"

"Chakawas is plenty of company. Besides shouldn't you be looking into us getting home sometime soon?" Despite her protest, she enjoyed his visits. Church wasn't able to find the time, accept to say hello once the day before, and Manny couldn't look her in the eye. He blamed himself for her being injured, and despite her insistence that it wasn't his fault, Manny still couldn't forgive himself. \_He was always the emotional one, \_Erin thought to herself chuckling.

"Shepard's giving the Normandy's repairs top priority, but even if we get her flying again we still have to find out what the Covenant are looking for."

"And how is the great Commander Shepard handling all the stress?" She stressed the "great" in a mocking tone. Raising her arms above her head for affect

Sam chuckle. "To be honest, not well. The stress is getting to him. Even Traynor says she can see it, he hasn't slept or eaten properly. And I swear he has a secret stash of alcohol he's kept to himself."

"Might be why Church finally shut up about him. For two damn months all we heard was him and James claiming 'what an honor it was to serve under Commander Shepard,'" again she added a sarcastic snarl to the name.

Laughing again, Sam checked the time. He still needed to eat before he met Church and Shepard, and already twenty minutes had come and gone.

"Go on, I'll be alright here by my lonesome," Erin said noticing his unwillingness to leave.

"Same time tomorrow?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Standing, Sam held Erin's hand, and squeezed it lightly. "No. You really don't."

\* \* \*

><p>Carefully, Church drove the Ghost into Normandy's hanger bay. After much frustration, he and Joker were able to lace it behind the Mako. Unfortunately the entire bay was packed, nearly to the brim. There was little room to move anything around, let alone an alien vehicle wider than a Krogan. Finally, Church stepped off the Ghost and deactivated it. Wiping his brow, he turned to Joker who threw him a canteen of water.<p>

"Well it fits at least," Church said. He pressed the canteen to his lips, and tilting his head back pushed the cool liquid down his throat.

"You know, I never was able to ask about your name," Joker said changing the subject. He leaned against the Ghost's front end and looked towards Church.

"What about it?"

"Well it's just odd. Not everyday you meet someone with no religious ideology, be named after a place of worship."

"Odd? Say's the guy named 'Joker.'"

"Yes, but that's just a nickname. Not the one on my dog tags."

Grimacing, Church sat down on a crate opposite Joker. "Fair enough. I was actually adopted, by a Turian couple."

"Wait what? Some skull face actually wanted to have a human child?"

Laughing, Church returned to his story. "No not exactly. Ol' Pop was part of the embassy for the Turian Hierarchy and the Alliance. He thought it would help his standings if he took in a lowly Earth child. Not that I could complain, they were good enough parents, raised me since I was born"

"How does this relate to your name being Church?" Joker said,



crossing his arms in puzzlement.

"I'm getting to that. So obviously neither he nor Mom spoke much English, they could only carry on very formal polite conversations. Mom was a very religious person though, often shouting at me saying I'd... well basically sinned. Never understood what a Turian sin was to begin with. But I digress, apparently men in her family were named after prominent titans, based off an ancient religion on Palaven. I being a Human it would be wise to name me after some of our religious icons. Most would have done say Jesus, or Muhammad. But the first religious word my mother ever learned in English was 'Church'. And the rest is basically history."

"I've got to say that story's kind of lame."

"Lame? What were you expecting?"

Contemplating the thought, Joker placed his chin in his fist and began to rub it mockingly, trying to show his mind in deep thought. "I don't know, how bout if you were captured and raised by Batarian pirates. And that 'Church' is just an old nickname that continues to follow you to this day."

Shaking his head, Church stood up a hand on Joker's soldier. "How bout... No," he said coldly. Turning around, Church grabbed his flask off the crate and began to exit the Normandy's bay. Joker quickly followed.

"What if you captured an Asari matriarch and..." Joker said continuing the discussion as they exited the ship.

\* \* \*

><p>One thing the galaxy never seemed to lack was liquor. There never seemed to be a problem that couldn't be solved, at least temporarily, through the timeless act of drinking. Desperate to find some release from the stress, Shepard found himself again in his cabin pouring a bright bottle of scotch into a small glass. The past three nights had been like this, him alone with nothing but a very old bottle.<p>

Holding the glass high, he shouted as he toasted with himself. "To hell with it all!" he tilted his head back and quickly downed the glass. Slamming it on the desk, he started to pour a second round.

"Room for one more?" Ashley had some how managed to enter undetected. "Hey skipper."

"Look Ash, I don't need to hear it." Shepard kept his eyes away from her. Instead he focused them entirely on the bottle, expecting it thoroughly.

"Perhaps not, Liara was always better at these heart to hearts than me anyway," Ashley pulled a chair out, and sat down next to Shepard. "I just need a drink."

Shepard grumbled. "Wrex was better at heart to hearts than you, and better at drinking too," he went back to pouring himself a glass, and, after grabbing another one from a drawer, poured her one

too.

Ashley tipped the glass to her mouth, smirking ever so lightly as she did. "I won't argue that."

They both drank in silence for a moment, it wasn't until after the third round that Ashley tried to talk.

"Shepard I can't imagine how difficult this has to be. You're keeping us all alive, single handed," she paused as he refilled their drinks. "God knows I haven't been much help of late."

Unexpectedly, Shepard muttered something through his drunken state. "That much is for sure."

Ignoring his remark, Ashley continued. "The point is Shepard, I'm here for you, like I should have been for the Collectors. Like I should have been for everything else," she leaned over and grabbed his hand. Still Shepard refused to look at her. "I know we don't have the old squad, but what would they say if they saw you like this? What would Kaiden say?"

He visibly flinched. She never used Kaiden's death as a tool to manipulate him, but now was not the time for babying.

"What do you want Ash?"

"I want the old Shepard back. The one who was able to stop Saren, the Geth, and the Collectors! The one who single handily changed the galaxy and Humanity's place in it. The one saved so many lives, both Human and alien."

He continued to sit, his position unchanged since she entered. Losing hope, she released his arm and leaned back in the chair. She'd tried almost every trick she could think of to get to him. Almost everything.

"I want the man I loved."

Sighing slowly, Shepard sat and thought for several minutes. Finally he looked at her, he still wore a blank exhausted face, but the spark was back. It was the first one she had seen it since their landing.

"Come on then, let's go get to work."

**\*\*AN: \*\***Well I'll be quick here. I've been working on this chapter for a while and using techniques I've picked up. I hope they show. Still trying to be as realistic as possible, but I wanted to slow down a bit and develop the characters here more. The first few chapters were, again, trying to set up what will be happening and getting through all the early action. Now I'm going to slow down a bit. Please review and let me know what you think. Also this chapter does not mean Shep will end up with Ash, just that he romanced her after the events of Mass Effect 1  
>If anyone is confused about the lore of either universe, I'll be attempting to make a Codex of sorts that will explain everything from races to how the Reaper-Forerunner timeline could work.<p>

And as always thanks for reading

## 11. Chapter 11 The Offensive

**\*\*Ch 11\*\***

**\*\*The Offensive\*\***

**\*\*Normandy landing area surface of Halo\*\***

**\*\*2 months before Reaper invasion\*\***

They all gathered at Traynor's temporary control center. Standing next to a monitor were Church, Sam, and Shepard. Finishing his report, Church turned around to the rest of the group gathered. Ashley and James stood next to each other, muttering to themselves about Church's convoluted plan. Sitting on crate, Manny looked to Traynor and shook his head; trying to say this was a bad idea.

"Church, there has to be a better way to do this," Manny said, now looking at his leader. "This is just suicide."

Sam glared at him, "Oh, and what would you recommend?"

Shepard prevented Manny from answering, "Go over your intel one more time, Church."

Having already explained the entire story, Church sighed in agitation before starting yet again. "At approximately 1800 hours, Sam and I picked up a large contact on the motion trackers. Moving through the forest, we eventually came upon a Covenant vehicle; the Ghost was piloted by a single Grunt. Our best assumption is that the Grunt was part of a long range reconnaissance patrol."

Church paused for a moment to catch his breath, "After taking out the Grunt, Sam and I were able to take control of the Ghost. We decided to take it in the direction the Grunt had come from, in order to find out if the Covenant had indeed landed. At about 1845, we came across an incredibly large clearing in the forest. There we found Covenant ground forces, placing defenses at some sort of landing site. In the center of their activity, there was a large platform which created some sort of gravity well. Above the platform was a frigate class ship, connected to the ground through the gravity well."

Sam decided to cut in and finish the rest, "We believe the Covenant are exploring Halo, and their using that site as a base camp. So far, that's the only location with a reliable way off this ring."

"I understand that," Manny stood up from his seat. "What I don't understand is why the hell we need to conduct two missions simultaneously."

Unsurprisingly, it was Shepard who answered, "According to EDI, the Covenant are exploring this ring. That means they're looking for something, and we need to find it. While the Normandy was landing, EDI was able to get a good view of the area. She spotted an island, several clicks west of here. According to the communications intercepted by Church, the Covenant are looking for something on that island. We need to find out what."

"Then what exactly is your plan, Commander?" Manny looked visibly upset. He wasn't in favor of a direct offensive, especially not while they were in such poor condition to defend.

"Church will take you and Sam to the island, find out what's there and come back here without being followed. I'll take Ash and James to the Covenant frigate. With luck, we'll be able to take the ship and have a safe way off this planet."

Shepard looked around the room, most the faces looked worried and frightened. They still weren't completely sold on the plan. Noticing this first, Church stepped forward past Shepard. He knew the Commander was on edge, and this would just be another annoyance to send him further off the cliff.

"Look, we don't have much of a choice here. That frigate may be our last hope to see Earth, and we still can't leave until we know what the Covenant glassed Harvest for," looking around, Church could tell his words did nothing to improve their demeanor. It was suicide, no matter what they chose to do. They weren't willing to follow Sheprad's orders while his judgement was clouded. He held their lives in his hands, and one bad call may just as well be the death of them all. And Shepard wasn't in the right state of mind.

Sighing, Shepard leaned off the table and stepped forward. It was his words they needed to hear, they had to know he was still sane.\_

><em>

"We never asked for this, never even saw it coming," he paused for a moment, trying to think of the right words to say. "We're out numbered, out gunned, and out classed in every way. But there are nearly a hundred lives depending on us to take them home. And there are billions more who are depending on us to finish this war before the Covenant glass us into oblivion!"

After a moment, his words were taking affect. Looking toward the Commander, Ash smiled and knew the old Shepard was back. They would survive, he'd see through to that. "Welcome back, Skipper," she muttered to herself.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Covenant Frigate landing zone<strong>

Night had fallen. The air was unnaturally quiet, there wasn't a single insect to make any noise. It wouldn't matter about the sound outside, the Mako's engine prevented anything else from being heard. Luckily, they wouldn't need stealth or deception to get on board. Just a well timed surprise.

"Damn it Shepard, watch where you're driving. You nearly ran me off the road," said James through the radio. While Shepard drove the Mako, James had decided to use the captured Ghost. Unfortunately, he was still trying to perfect his driving abilities.

"James, get behind us. We're coming up on the enemy position," Ash turned the turret around to face ahead of them. Sure enough, there was a break in the forest. The moonlight shined across the large

clearing, its back drop a pristine beach. The Covenant frigate cast its shadow across much of the area. There were several dozen squads of Grunts, Jackals, and Elites. Seemingly all the Covenant forces were set up in this particular way, with the Elites leading the much smaller and weaker species.

Luckily for Shepard and his squad, most of the Grunts seemed to be asleep. Only a few were walking the clearings perimeter, one unfortunate soul was rammed by the Mako as it exited the forest. Immediately, Ashley opened fire with the Mako's turret. Firing indiscriminately into the alien forces. The Covenant was caught completely off guard, exactly according to plan. Several Elites were obliterated before they were able to move, their organs and limbs flying across the field.

James followed suit, using the Ghost to ram and bash the Grunts as they ran in fear. Maneuvering to avoid fire, the Mako was able to make quick work of most the enemy. Suddenly a lone Grunt appeared directly in front of them. Without hesitation, Shepard floored the gas and prepared to ram it. Panicking, the Grunt held the trigger on his plasma pistol. Covering his head with a free arm, he fired nearly blind at the advancing Mako.

The EMP caused the entire Mako to stall, directly in front of the Grunt. It was only inches away from touching him.

"Ha, you not scary now," the Grunt taunted. He placed his hands above his head and danced around, mocking Shepard and the vehicle. The Grunt's celebration was short lived. James appeared from the other side of the Mako, and after finding the still dancing Grunt, fired the plasma cannon burning away the Grunt's mask and face.

"That's all the hostiles," Shepard said appearing from the Mako's hatch. Ashley following close behind him, both with their weapons drawn.

"Please tell me that's the last we see of that damn Mako," Ashley said cursing the name in disgust. Pulling up next to them, James deactivated the Ghost and pulled out his rifle.

"Come on, the Mako's not that bad... The amour did a good job of protecting you," James said, coming to the defense of the APC.

Turning around, Shepard glared at the two, "Really, you're arguing about that now! Need I remind you we need to focus. Look around, try to find some weapons. I want every rocket possible, before we head up that beam."

Before anyone of them could move, the grave lift changed color from purple to green. Shepard stood in between his squad and the lift, with his back facing it. James and Ash both wore blank stares on their faces, apparently baffled at what they saw. Shuddering at the thought, Shepard slowly turned around. In time to see two Hunters reach the ground.

"Well shit."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Covenant occupied island<strong>

Manny sat on the edge of the shuttle's open doorway. Leaning against the edge, he looked down at his feet dangling over the side. "Water looks pretty cool from up here. Maybe we should just stop and take a swim?"

Church stifled a laugh, "Why is it you only want to relax when we're about to die? Otherwise I have to order you to sit down and quit working."

"Something about dying just takes a lot out of you. Sam you explain it to him."

Sam was sitting in the co-pilot seat of the Kodiak, Cortez sat next to him piloting the shuttle. Turning back from the console, Sam looked towards Church. "It's real simple, Manny here is afraid of some little aliens."

This caused Church to visibly smile and laugh. Walking over, he stood above Manny and lightly kicked him in the rear. "Don't worry about it, we'll make sure you only deal with the really tiny ones."

"It's not the little ones I'm afraid of," he responded coldly. Church didn't expect that response, and was caught slightly off guard.

"Look, what happened to Erin..." Church thought a moment, he needed to use come up with the right words. "Is in the past. She's fine now, and we need you to focus. If we can't count on you to watch our six, I'll be forced to have Joker take your place."

Manny chuckled after hearing that. He knew the need to focus, how his squad and the crew were depending on them. Now wasn't the time for double guessing.

"Heads up, there's a lot of activity on the far side of the island," Cortez said from the cockpit. "I'm putting you down here on the beach. It'll be a bit of a walk, but I can't go any closer without being seen."

Hovering over the beach, the Kodiak dropped off its passengers, stirring up sand in the process. After putting on their helmets, Church gave Cortez the all clear. In response, Cortez turned the shuttle and flew low, straight across the horizon.

"Come on then, once more onto the beach."

**\*\*AN:** **\*\*This chapter seemed like a bit of a chore at first, but after a while I got back into the groove and it turned out pretty good. This of course is leading up to some pretty good action, and if any of you have played CE you probably know where I'm going with this. Please tell me what you think, I love to listen to criticism.**

And as always thanks for reading.

**\*\*PS\*\*** oh and I could still use help figuring out the ending. If you'd like pop a review and give me your idea, no such thing as a bad one.

**\*\*PPS \*\***One more thing, I'm also looking for a new beta. If you are interested please PM me and we'll chat it out.

## 12. Chapter 12 Back for More

**\*\*Ch 12\*\***

**\*\*Back for More\*\***

**\*\*Surface of Halo\*\***

**\*\*2 months before Reaper invasion\*\***

The air hissed, as a large plasma sailed past Shepard's head. He could feel the heat and energy pass over him, narrowly missing. Caustiously, he peeked over the side of the purple container he used for cover. Taking fire from the second Hunter, Ashley and James were pinned down on the opposite side of the clearing, hiding behind the Covenant's portable cover structure.

While one Hunter focused on them, Shepard was left to deal with the other alone. During their recon, they had run into these massive creatures. Unlike the Grunts, Jackals, or even Elites, they were never able to kill or damage them in any way and were forced to retreat. Running here was not an option.

Shepard activated his radio, "Carnage shots, and incendiary ammo! We need to burn through their armor."

Another plasma round hit the container, shaking it violently. Already, the container was melting away from the bombardment. The plasma cannon's power was brutal. Already out of thermal clips, Shepard searched for another weapon, and found a very large cannon on a dead Grunt next to him.

Grabbing it, Shepard looked over the weapon. The Grunts carried it on their shoulders, he placed it on his. A green rectile appeared from the side, highlighting everything in front of him. Again, another Hunter round hit the container. Shepard checked the ammo, and leaned out of cover to fire.

Ashley and James were retreating, both of the Hunters had focused their fire on the pair. They ducked and dived wildly avoiding the increasingly rapid plasma fire. Soon they would run out of room, a beach was in front of them. The forest they had exited from, lay on the other side of the Hunters.

Quickly, Shepard took aim. Seeing his opportunity, he fired a round directly at the closest Hunter's orange backside. The plasma traveled relatively slow, but accelerated about halfway to its target. Hitting the kink in the Hunter's armor head on, Shepard followed up with another volley, emptying the remainder of the clip.

Howling in pain, the Hunter could do nothing as it was bombarded. Its crud metal shield, which blocked every smaller round fired at it, boiled away when it turned to protect itself. After the last round hit, it fell to its knees with a howl of final protest. Its brother screamed, without even seeing the other's death, it had known.

Turning, it charged at Shepard, cannon and shield raised, prepared for a counter attack. Shepard threw the cannon desperately at the charging Hunter, and then turned to run. Narrowly missing the Hunter's arm as it swung and knocked away the remainder of Shepard's cover, sending it flying into the ocean behind them.

Everything seemed to slow down for Shepard, his adrenaline rush was beginning to take full hold of him. Now, he ran purely on instinct. Sprinting at full speed, Shepard was stopped abruptly when the Hunter fired a shot in front of him, blocking his path. Skidding to a halt, he turned to face the Hunter.

He slammed his chest, "Come on!" he shouted.

Seeming to accept his challenge, the Hunter walked up to Shepard, casting the human in its incredibly large shadow. Raising his shield arm, the Hunter prepared for a killing blow. But was stopped short when shots were fired at the weak point on its back.

The beast turned to face the two humans firing from behind. It turned completely to face them, raising its shield and cannon arm to fire. The two stood completely unprotected right next to each other, it would take one well placed shot to kill them both.

Right as the Hunter's cannon began to hum, it stopped abruptly. Shepard had punched through the worms in the opening on the Hunter's back. Quickly, he pulled his hand back and ran in the opposite direction. A second later, a grenade exploded from inside the Hunter, spewing armor and burnt worms in multiple directions. Unable to run fast enough, Shepard was knocked on his face by the blast, shards of armor and worms rained over him.

Ashley and James rushed over and pulled him back to his feet, checking him over for wounds. After confirming his shields had taken the blunt of the blast, Shepard removed his helmet to look it over. He found a large sharp shard protruding from the back. "Close one," he muttered.

"That was some damn quick thinking, Loco," James said. He handed over some spare thermal clips.

"Yeah, thanks for the diversion. Let's just hope we don't find any of those things inside that frigate." Shepard turned around to face the ship and its gravity lift attached to the ground.

Ashley came up behind him, "About that, any ideas on how we get this thing to send us up?"

Smiling, Shepard activated his omni-tool, "EDI, mind giving us a hand?"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Covenant occupied island<strong>

The three marines stood in silence as the waves crashed on the beach. A large rock structure took up the center of the island. The only way to the other side was along the beach, around the center. After scanning the area, Church gave the order to move up. Slowly, the trio



began to move.

They moved in silence. Church and Sam kept their weapons pointed ahead, while Manny walked slowly behind keeping his rifle pointed at the rear. After passing under a large rock arch, Church ordered an immediate stop. He and Sam, took cover along the side of the arch. Manny stood behind him keeping an eye again on their rear.

"Contacts. Doesn't look like a lot. Maybe three, no four Jackals and a dozen Grunts," Church said.

Manny turned his head to face him, "That's it? That can't be right."

"Their guarding an entrance into the cliff side, probably more inside," Sam said, glancing at him.

Grabbing a grenade, Church motioned for Sam to do the same. The Covenant forces were relatively close to each other, enough so that a well placed grenade would take out most of them. Church primed his grenade, and held it to prevent the timer from starting. Sam did the same, and with his free hand counted down from three.

Once his countdown was complete, they both lunged the grenades at their targets. Instantly, after hitting the ground, the explosion crippled most of the Grunt and Jackals. The rest were completely dazed, allowing for Sam and Church to finish them off with only a few well placed shots.

Standing up, Church patted Manny on the back, causing him to turn around to inspect the damage.

"See, Manny, what I tell yeah. Piece of cake," Sam said snickering.

The group moved forward, swiftly shooting any of the Grunts that tried to crawl away. Turning to the door, Church ordered Manny to get it open. It was a relatively simple task, the door opened simply at his presence. Inside the door was an unnaturally dark hallway, the only illuminations came from a few weak lights in the walls.

Taking point, Sam activated his light and walked in, Church and Manny following close behind. All three of their lights danced across the walls, as they searched for anything of interest. After a minute of walking, they came upon an elevator at a back wall.

"What do you think is all the way down there?" Sam asked, peering down into the abyss.

"I don't know, but we need to find out," Church said, stepping onto the platform.

Manny pointed back down the hallway, "Maybe we should just go back. There is something not right about this."

Sam chuckled, "Come on, where's your sense of adventure?"

Manny only frowned in response, he knew there was no changing their minds.

Church waited for the two to join him on the platform, "Think we could get him to do it for a scooby-snack?"

Without another pause, Church activated the elevator. The halls and doors here were similar to the ones at Harvest. Even the elevator acted the same, as if nothing were actually moving at all. Suddenly, the platform stopped. In front of it was an incredibly large door, with a similar angular design with the rest of the building.

"Well, what's behind door number 1?"

**\*\*AN:\*\*** Sorry about the long update, but I've got a lot on my plate. Please for the love of god, don't mention any gramatical errors or the like in this chapter. I was forced to write it on my Xbox, so the quality will be worse than normal. I'm sorry for that, but like I said I've got a lot on my plate.

Please tell me what you think, and as always thanks for reading.

### 13. Chapter 13 I get High

**\*\*Ch 13\*\***

**\*\*I get high, with a little help from my friends\*\***

**\*\*Aboard Covenant frigate\*\***

**\*\*2 months before Reaper invasion\*\***

The ship's air was stale and warm, and methane could be smelled all around. A vastly different environment than that of the Halo. All around the hanger bay were purple containers and methane tanks. Surrounding the gravity lift were four Wraith tanks, all parked ominously. Once Shepard and his squad were aboard, it wasn't long before they ran into trouble.

Two Elites had camouflaged themselves. It wasn't until they started charging the squads position did they take any notice. Firing in unison on the aliens, one quickly fell, his camo deactivating and his plasma sword sizzling on the ground. The other continued to charge, making a lunging strike at Ashley. Bringing up her omni-blade, she narrowly knocked the Elite to the side. Turning, the Elite moved his arm for another attack. As he brought his full power down upon the human, he was quickly stopped by several shots to his head.

James walked over and picked up the fallen Elite's weapon, "If you're done dancing, Ash, I think we should get moving," he said smugly.

Ashley grabbed the other blade, deactivated it and placed it on her belt. She checked her omni-tool for the map EDI had managed to find among the Covenant archives she had previously accessed.

Shepard stood in an open doorway that led into an empty hall. Walking over to him, Ashley looked at her map and said, "Map shows we need to go down here and find an elevator that should bring us to the center of the ship."

Shepard looked at her puzzled, "Center? We need to find the bridge."

Ash pointed to the holographic representation on her omni-tool, "They keep their bridge in the center of the ship. Must make it easier to protect in the case of enemy fire."

By now James had joined them looking over the map behind Ashley's shoulder, "In the center of the ship? What? Why haven't any of our guys thought of that? Putting the bridge in front just seems silly now."

Standing, Shepard pointed down the hallway, "This way it is then."

They walked down the hall, carefully checking every nook and cranny as they went, careful not to let anything sneak up on them. The interior of the ship was curved, similar to the shark like curves of the outside hull. The hall would split into other halls all following the deep purple curved architecture of the first. The doors separating them would glow bright then hum whenever someone stepped close enough to enter. There were no markings, no indications of where they were going expect for the occasional grunt workers that were quickly disposed of.

James was the first to question the ships apparent emptiness, "Anyone wonder where the aliens went?"

"This was the only ship damaged, and they're using it as a base of operations for their ground campaigns on Halo while it's repaired," Ash said shrugging, "Maybe they only left a skeleton crew."

"We actually managed to damage one of these things?" James asked amazed.

Shepard answered, "According to EDI, the 'Truth and Reconciliation, was damaged when an enemy anti ship weapon fired on one of their plasma cannons. Causing minor hull breaches and a destroyed port gun.'"

Suddenly, the group stopped, their eyes trained on a peculiar creature floating above their heads. It hadn't noticed their presence and showed no sign of aggression. This creature, what ever it was, was unlike the other species they had encountered from the Covenant. It wasn't bipedal, and appeared to have no form of combat ability. Its only appendages seemed to be glowing tentacles that would take apart small parts of the ship or of computers before replacing them. It seemed to take no notice to the three aliens that stood just before it.

"Any idea on what this thing is?" James asked as he took his omni-tool and scanned it.

Shepard contacted EDI through his radio, "EDI, you got..."

Before Shepard could finish, the creature finally noticed the trio and floated slowly towards James. Ashley aimed her rifle at it, but it showed no sign of aggression. As it floated towards James, it held out a tentacle aiming directly for the omni-tool James had been using

to scan it. Beginning to tense, Ashley braced herself to fire before it was able to change into a possibly aggressive stance.

EDI spoke to the squad, "I would recommend holding your fire Lieutenant Commander, it would be better to keep this one alive."

Ashley still kept her weapon aimed on the creature as it began to fiddle with James's armor and omni-tool attached to his arm.

"It's better safe than sorry with aliens, EDI. What the hell is it doing?" Ashley said stunned as the alien began to take apart the armor around James's arm and shoulder. It took apart every screw and bolt that fastened the armor together. It began twisting the pieces and breaking them into smaller sections. It floated to different parts of the hallway grabbing and tearing apart pieces and adding them to the armor.

"That is a huragok. An ancient form of organic machine discovered by the Covenant. They're engineers, and that one is up grading James's armor," EDI said seemingly amazed by the hovering alien.

Shepard spoke up moving closer to the creature, "And why would it want to help us? We're the enemy."

Taking another step closer, Shepard held out his hand as the huragok started to replace the omni-tool and armor to James's arm. Reaching slowly, Shepard attempted to touch the glowing creature. After making contact, the engineer only briefly stopped to turn its tentacle head towards the Commander and tilt it in curiosity, before going straight back to its work.

"They're not Covenant, Shepard. They are only programmed to learn, build, fix, and protect. So long as you don't attack them or their equipment, they shouldn't become aggressive. Be careful though, they are highly flammable and harnessed with explosives." EDI said through the radio.

James jumped at the word explosive, yanking his arm back a bit from the engineer who took little notice. "Wait, did you say explosives?" a slight squeak was heard in James's voice as he panicked in fear. "Why do we have to let it mess with my stuff?"

The engineer had already moved on from the arm and omni-tool and began taking apart the rest of his armor. In a matter of minutes it had disassembled and then reassembled almost every piece of James's armor. Floating back a bit, the huragok looked back over James as if admiring its work. Suddenly, it started moving its tentacles in a bizarre motion akin to sign language.

"He wants you to check over it," EDI translated.

James began looking over his armor. Whatever the huragok had done, his armor now felt lighter and yet stronger. He could barely feel like he was wearing anything at all.

"Man, I never realized how little the Alliance actually wants us to breathe in their armor. This feels like a second skin," James said while shaking his arm trying to fathom what the alien had done.

EDI interrupted James's appraisal of the armor, "Not only that, the engineer has increased your shield capacity and recharge speed nearly 300%. Your omni-tool has also been enhanced. It is not able to transmit farther and works faster."

James's curiosity had gotten the better of him. Instead of listening to EDI, he was testing his newly upgraded toys. He was able to move objects around now at great lengths using the omni-tool and its instantaneous three dimensional object construction. Picking up a fallen piece of metal, James threw it far down the hall. Surprisingly, the engineer chased it down the hall like a small pet trying to play. Before the metal landed, James caught it using the omni-tool, much to the engineer's displeasure.

Continuing to talk, EDI said, "Shepard, it may be in our best interest to bring this huragok back to the Normandy. They possess almost all knowledge about Covenant systems and technology. We may be able to have it repair the Normandy to complete operational status."

"Screw that," James interrupted. He was now face down on the ground, with one placed behind his back. As he spoke he lifted himself off the ground using his free arm, a feat proven more impressive by the fact the huragok now lay, grasping to his back with its weight completely supported by James. "With what this thing can do, we could have a Normandy able to take on the entire Reaper armada. Hell, I ain't even breaking a sweat. Suit now packs a pretty damn big punch."

Shepard's mouth seemed to drop, dumbfounded by the current state of events. Ashley seemed to share his bewilderment, unable to take her eyes off of James and the alien on his back.

Speaking into his radio, Shepard contacted EDI, "Now why would this thing just help us so willingly? We are trying to kill his friends."

"Shhhh don't tell him that, I think he likes me," James said. He sat cross legged now with the huragok cuddled in front of him, his long tentacle head nuzzled up against James's face. "Who's my good little alien bad ass engineer? You're going to give Estabaun a run for his money."

Ashley's eye twitched as her face went from dumbfounded to disturbed in a matter of seconds, "Right, so I say we kill it. All in favor?"

EDI finally interjected her response, "The huragok is of Forerunner design, the ones responsible for building the Halos and the facilities on Harvest. Their only purpose was to preserve and protect technology. When the Covenant found them, centuries ago, they willingly helped to reverse engineer all of the advanced technology. Eventually the Covenant forced them to completely submit to their Hierarchs. They place them in special suicide harnesses to prevent them from being captured. Fortunately for us, there was no one around to manually blow it. Their kind is basically in a form of slavery, though they don't appear to mind. So long as they are able to learn and repair technology they are content."

"And where did you learn all this? More Covenant data?"

"No, it told me. While it was taking apart James's omni-tool it was also talking to me. It was strange, Shepard. Like I was talking to an equal."

Realizing the potential, Ashley was the first to speak, "Which means we might have an unknown weapon for when the Reapers show up."

Stepping forward towards James still playing with the huragok on the floor, Shepard knelt down. He gained the alien's attention and began to pet its head. Accepting the sign of friendship, the huragok moved its head into Shepard's hand nuzzling it like a cat. It straightened up, and moved one of its tentacle appendages to Shepard's head letting the tip glow bright before touching his forehead. A sign of friendship and understanding.

**\*\*AN: \*\***As always thank you for reading, every view means the world. If you could just take the time to drop a review, it could be positive or negative, hell just tell me I'm a gay fag, I'm not picky. Every little bit helps.

And a very special thank you to the few people following this story. I started writing it for myself, but you'll be damn sure I'll finish it for you few fellows as well!

Bonus points if you get the inspiration for the last scene between the engineer and Shepard!

#### 14. Say Hello

**\*\*AN: \*\***I SHALL FINISH THIS STORY!

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ch 14<strong>

**\*\*Say Hello\*\***

**\*\*Deep beneath Covenant occupied island\*\***

**\*\*2 months before Reaper invasion\*\***

With a resounding low toned moan, the door before Church and his squad opened. The large, but thin, door split apart at the middle. Both sides started vanishing behind the wall next to the door, as they were dragged inside by unseen mechanisms. It seemed to move with such ease and speed that one would think the door and facility was brand new. Amazing considering its actual age of over a hundred thousand years.

As the door slid open, Church, Manny, and Sam were bathed in a white blinding light. Shielding their eyes, it took them a moment to adjust to the light. Once the blinding effect had subsided, Church opened his eyes. The sight before him was almost breathtaking.

The doorway led to a large walkway, with no rails on the side to protect people from the seemingly endless drop below. The walkway led to a large open room and straight to a small terminal, with several

symbols and buttons. However, it was in the center of the room that caught the squad's attention. In front of the terminal, floating over the bottomless pit below them, there was a massive holographic representation of the Halo ring. Surrounding the hologram was the metal walkway, which wrapped around the floating ring in a circle.

Walking forward, Church lowered his gun to his side, completely awestruck by the sheer size of the underground facility. His squad mates followed, attention totally focused on the room and its hologram.

"Right, three guesses as to what this is," Sam said, while reaching out for the terminal.

He had expected a sarcastic remark from either Church or Manny, but it was EDI who responded over the radio, "'This' is a highly advanced system, designed to pinpoint locations on Halo, their uses and functions, and translate it to the user using a highly advanced formula to determine their native tongue."

Smiling, Sam said, "So it's a map?"

"For lack of a better term, yes a map. If you allow me to access the controls, I should be able to start tapping into the ring's computer and functions."

Eager to finish and leave, Manny stepped forward and activated his omni-tool. After connecting to the map's computer, he allowed EDI to upload part of herself into the system. Within a moment, her hologram appeared before them.

Looking over the terminal, Church asked, "Now how did you do that?"

Shrugging, Manny responded with sarcasm, "It was very technical, wouldn't want to get into any details."

"The computer allowed him complete access," EDI said, ruining Manny's humor.

The squad watched as the hologram before them started turning and twisting. The picture started zooming in on a small speck of land on the inside of it, the island where they stood. Next came a small burst from the island. Little green lines traveled from the island all around the ring, until they met on the far side. As they went, little dots appeared with a holographic red label floating next to each one. At the location of the island, there were only three dots, and at the map showing of their base camp, there were several all jumbled together into one large bright light. Another burst came from the island, this time it was a blue similar to the color of EDI. After it went by, several of the lights turned to blue instead of their original red, including the three representing them on the island.

"Is that, every life form on Halo?" Sam asked, while pointing to the ring.

"It is," answered EDI.

"And what are you looking for?"

EDI's hologram vanished from the console's projection, "What the Covenant is currently looking for, the control center for the Halo." As she spoke, the holographic ring spun around. Eventually, the entire hologram zoomed in on a large piece of land on the surface of the Halo. Switching to a side view, the hologram started splitting the ring into different sections, revealing several levels below the surface.

Curious, Church spoke up, "EDI, talk to us. What are we looking at?"

"My apologies, the vast network of information stored here is, well remarkable. The Covenant seem to think there is something of value here. I can not pin point the control room. There appears to be something else in the system."

"What like an anti virus program?" Manny asked half sarcastically. "You are snooping around in their computers, EDI."

"Send me the coordinates, EDI. I'll get Cortez on the radio," Church said, interrupting Manny.

Before any of them could move, EDI's hologram reappeared, "Actually, I may have found a better way to travel."

Suddenly, all three men were surrounded in a bright golden light. As the light spun around them faster, their view of the map room grew darker, until it was gone completely. Replacing it was a bright blinding white light, that vanished as soon as it appeared.

The light and the map room were now gone, replaced with a far more natural view. White metal walls were now massive trees covered with moss. A thickening fog could be seen in the air. Below their legs, the squad now had a murk filled water up to their thighs.

"What the hell, EDI?" Sam yelled into his radio.

"I found a teleportation system, capable of sending you to any location on Halo. Far faster than waiting on Cortez to fly you."

Still upset, Sam continued, "A little warning next time, damn. Where are we anyway?"

"The system was supposed to send you to another Forerunner facility. Obviously it did not, I must have miscalculated. Hold on while I try again."

Unwilling to risk another failed teleportation, Church spoke up, "Nope, no, not happening. Just tell us how far and we'll start walking. Don't want to risk another miscalculation."

"Miscalculation!?" Manny cried, "She could have miscalculated us into a damn tree! Isn't anyone a little bit concerned about that?"

Ignoring him, Church continued, "Right, it's just under a klick north



of us. Come on, we got some walking to do."

"I think I may have lost part of my brain on the way here," Manny continued, slightly hysterical.

Sam laughed, "You lost that a long time ago," he said, before starting to walk through the thick murky waters. "Now come on, let's get through this swamp."

Grumbling to himself, Manny started after Church and Sam. Pushing through the filth infested waters was challenging. Though there wasn't any animal life to speak of on Halo, Manny's fear and imagination started to take over as his boots and leg armor dipped farther into the murk.

Suddenly, Manny jumped and pointed his rifle at the water. "What was that?" He asked, his voice terrified.

"What was what?" Church asked, his tone irritated.

"Something just brushed past my leg!"

Church glared at Manny, "Nothing touched you, now come on!"

"Yeah, yeah okay I'm coming."

Continuing to trek through the swamp, Manny continuously mumbled to himself, "Find a happy place, find a happy place." All the while he kept his rifle aimed high, jerking it from tree branch to tree branch. Jittering his teeth in fear, he kept his feet jumping around as he walked, hoping to avoid what ever he had felt before. Turning around, he continued to walk backwards, not wanting anything to sneak up behind him.

"Find a happy place. Anywhere but here."

Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder, "Uh, Manny."

"WHAT!?" He shouted, whipping his head around violently. After a brief moment of fear, he saw that it was Sam who had touched him.

"We're here," Sam said, pointing to a small metal door behind him. It led into a decent sized bunker that was partially buried under a massive hill.

Manny's cheeks blushed, "Oh, yeah right."

Sam looked at his friend, puzzled he asked "Are you alright? You seem more on edge then normal." As they spoke, Church walked up to the door, searching for a way to open it.

"Yeah, I just have a really bad feeling about this is all."

Chuckling, Sam replied with a light slap on the shoulders, "Come on then. You're starting to sound like a bad cliché."

They walked over to the door, which Church had just finished opening. Unlike most of the other Forerunner facilities the squad had been to,

this one wasn't brightly lit or completely spotless. Instead darkness filled the interior, the natural light from outside only illuminated a few feet into the door way. Though it was enough to show an ominous sign. Right at the entrance, the light glossed over a freshly made pile of purple blood.

"Well that's creepy," Church said. Activating his omni-tool's flashlight, he took a step inside. Unflinching, Sam followed his squad leader, though predictably Manny hesitated.

"I know I say this a lot, but maybe we shouldn't go in there."

Letting loose a sigh of regret, Church spoke to Manny without turning around, "Just stay out here and radio if there's any trouble."

"Yeah I can do that."

Now alone, Church and Sam went deeper into the bunker. Along the way, they found several more piles of blood of varying colors, and even a few fallen weapons. Eventually, they reached a large empty room, with four doorways. Only two were opened, the one they had entered and the one across from them. The other two had been welded shut from their side, apparently trying to stop something or someone from getting out of the facility.

Stepping next to Church, Sam spoke in his ear, "As much as I hate to say it, maybe we should listen to Manny on this one. Doesn't it strike you as odd that there are no bodies for all this blood?"

Continuing on, Church spoke in little over a whisper, "No, they probably had some sort of incident and came to retrieve their dead. More than likely, they already have what they were looking for in here. I'd just like to know what it is they have."

The duo continued walking. They went through several other empty rooms and corridors, all the while traveling deeper into the facility. After passing through a malfunctioning door at the end of a particularly long stretch of hallway, they came upon the first piece of intrigue in their search. They entered a new room, this time filled with different kind of machines. There, along the walls, were several large clear cylinders that contained some type of green bubbling liquid. As the pair progressed, the bubbling liquid in the tanks went from empty, to containing some sort of disgusting blob.

It was at the end of the row of tanks, that the two stopped and starred. Before them was a mass of flesh and puss. It appeared suspended in its small prison, remaining still as the the liquid frothed around it.

Shinning his light over it, Sam questioned Church, "What do you suppose that is?"

A hissing scream prevented Church from answering. Turning around, they both noticed a container on the other side of the room had been shattered.

Suddenly, a small shadow scattered through the darkness, followed by

another round of yelps and screams coming from another room.

"Now we can go," Church said, backing up to the broken door.

The shadow moved again, unbeknownst to the humans. It twisted through their flashlights, avoiding their line of sight. Though it did not go completely unnoticed. The disgusting sound of a greasy pitter patter could be heard as the shadow went, which only caused the duo to back up quicker.

A flash of black crossed Church's field of vision, before vanishing right behind one of the containers. Suddenly, another one seemed to appear, quicker than the first. Begging to panic, Church turned to run, grabbing Sam by the arm as he did so. Yet it was as he grabbed him, that Church noticed Sam was convulsing erratically.

Focusing his flashlight on Sam, Church watched in horror as a pale green blob dug itself into Sam's neck. The blob's tentacle face, if you could call it that, dug at Sam's flesh into it had seemingly buried itself into him. Unable to look away, Church could only retreat in fear as he watched his friend fall to the ground, still shaking and digging at his neck.

Once the blob was safely nuzzled into Sam's neck and shoulder, Sam's entire body took on a grotesque change. Green plant like flesh ejected itself from Sam's back, and turned around to cover his head. His arms turned into large trunk like appendages, and the rest of his body seemed to have random points of puss ejecting from it. And at the center of the new creature that was Sam, sat the blob that attacked him, protruding a pink whisker like appendage from Sam's body.

"Ho-holy shit," Church stammered. He was shaking in fear, his rifle pointed to the ground as his left arm hung loose. "Sam, are you..."

Sam charged Church madly, swinging his arms madly about. Church turned to run, his flight instinct taking full command of his legs. Jumping through the broken door, he chanced a look back at Sam. The creature went without stopping, only smashing the door away with its flailing arms. Behind Sam, there came more of the small monstrous blobs, all scurrying after him.

Sprinting at full speed now, Church practically jumped through the open door at the end of the hallway. Once he was through, he turned around and physically shut the door. It slid easily closed, allowing for him to smash a small holographic control panel on the wall. Backing away from the door, Church hit the a wall behind him not more than six feet from the door. Sliding to the ground, Church kept his eyes ahead of him, not even blinking away the picture of the door.

A loud thud could be heard as Sam tried pounding the door down form the other side. Church flinched as a small dent was put into the metal, and then another, and another, before finally Sam gave off a defeated moan and let the door be, retreating back into the facility.

Silence fell over the slumped Church, as he cradled himself and his rifle. He was utterly alone now, nothing but he and his weapon. Rocking on the floor like a small infant, Church was unable to stand

or compose himself at all. The only thing he could see was Sam's body twisting drastically out of proportions, until it was something else entirely.

Unable to stomach the mental picture he held, Church leaned over and vomited on the floor. His heaves were soon accompanied by sobs of tears, as both fell to the floor in a small puddle. He was unable to contain himself, one of his squad mates had just been zombified, and then had tried to kill him. His friend had been turned into some sort of \_thing. \_He wasn't even sure Sam was still alive.

\_Maybe he's alright. Maybe this is some kind of bad dream, yeah just one bad dream. Sam is fine and probably keeping Erin company right now, \_He thought to himself.

"Just one bad dream," He said aloud, trying desperately to convince himself that it was truth.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>I'm not going to say much here, expect that I hope you like this chapter and will of course leave your reviews! The only real update I have to say is that I made a new cover for the story using some simplistic posters form both Halo and ME. I hope you all like it.

As always thanks for reading.

## 15. You Say Goodbye

**AN:** In a bit of a lul here folks. I'm going back and updating some of the previous chapters, they're awful compared to what little garbage I'm able to write now. However, I'm in desperate need of reviews. I've done everything I could think of, save for selling my soul. So please, even if you don't normally leave a review, just drop one in the box to tell me how terrible or how great this story is. Be brutishly honest, but please leave some feedback.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ch 15<strong>

**You say goodbye**

**Forerunner biological studies facility**

**2 months before Reaper invasion**

Cold and damp. That's all Church could think about, how cold and dirty he felt. Which is all he cared to think, really. Everything around him seemed to be against his sanity. From the stench of vomit, to the bent in door in front of him. Nothing seemed to be on his side.

He still sat there, huddled on the ground like a wee baby feigning for his mother. By now his stomach was void of any contents, and his face was red and soar. It was his eyes, though, that seemed to hurt the most. Church held them open, starring blankly into space. Refusing to even blink, lest the darkness consume him and the image

of Sam overwhelm him again.

An hour passed, then another. It seemed disheartening, that a grown man would be brought down to such a level. He didn't care, not at that moment anyway. All that seemed to matter was not to let the darkness overtake him, not to see Sam suffer like that again.

\_No, get up.\_

Finally, he stood up from his fetal position. Something inside him seemed to force him to stand. \_Now walk, \_Church thought to himself, trying to command his body to move. Though it was a struggle. He seemed unable to picture everything clearly, as though he were watching himself from a different reality.

Suddenly, he took a step and then another. Leaning against the wall as he walked, Church still held his rifle loosely against his side. Nothing right now, seemed more important than just a few simple steps.

It was a loud gargled scream, that brought Church back to his reality. However, hearing it seemed to trigger his adrenaline, as his palms and brow became sweaty with fear. He wasn't even sure if the noise had been real, or just a figment of his already paranoid imagination. Not willing to take any chances, Church readied his rifle, and started to quicken his pace.

Upon reaching the door to the next room, he stopped, just before the door would open. Taking a deep breathe, he stepped forward, keeping his Argus aimed directly ahead of him. The door opened, revealing an empty room. This was the same room Church had entered before, yet there was something different this time. Unable to shake the feeling, Church proceeded slowly. Carefully taking each step, he methodically scanned across the floor for any sign of movement.

Nearly halfway through the empty room, and something grabbed his attention. Facing right, he saw a shadow move from one corner to the next. Twitch reflexes and fear, caused him to fire a three round burst at the movement. Each shot hit their target, and a small disgusting whine was heard. Church moved closer to see what it was. Focusing his light on the shadow, he saw another one of the disgusting blobs from before. It had burst like a balloon, after he had shot it, spewing puss and skin everywhere along the floor. The sight almost forced Church to vomit again.

Choking down what little remained in his gut, he moved on, pushing the image from his mind.

\_Just keep moving, \_he thought to himself, trying desperately to keep his sanity.

Going back through the same way he and Sam had entered, Church continuously heard odd sounds. Moans, gasps of breathe, and shrieks, all seemed to be whispering within the halls of the facility. It was unnerving, every noise seemed to send him closer to insanity. Continuing on, and the noises seemed to grow louder and stronger, as if their source was getting closer.

After walking into the next room, they stopped. Everything seemed unnaturally quiet now, as if Church were the only thing moving.

Replacing the racket now, was Church's breathing. It was only that, and his heartbeat, that allowed him to know he was still alive. They both resonated in his ears, every beat of his heart thundered like a drum, and every breath he took seemed to resonate with him just a bit longer than usual. Now everything seemed amplified to him, he could feel every bead of sweat pour down his forehead, just behind his helmet.

Pausing for a moment, he listened closely, for any kind of movement. Spinning his body, he used his Argus's light to illuminate the room as best he could. He continued his search, watching as his light moved swiftly along the floor and walls, stopping, just as his light shown upon the room's exit. This door, would lead him to the final hallway, before the facility opened back up, into the swamp outside.

\_Almost there.\_

He took a step forward, deliberately moving it slowly, so as not to draw any attention, from things that might be watching. Just before Church was able to step again, something stopped him. Crawling away from a hole in the roof, was a dozen of the blob like monsters again. All of them were scurrying above him like insects going after their prey. Behind them, and something much larger appeared. It dropped from the hole like a rock, landing on the ground with a resounding thud. What ever 'it' was, it appeared to be humanoid, standing on two legs with two arms. But the comparison stopped there. The entire mass was similar to how Sam had appeared, with an odd plant like shell, oozing with a disgusting puss like substance, that covered the torso and head. From the look of the legs, Church guessed it had been some kind of elite, with its knees bent forward in same way the aliens' were.

Once it had landed, the alien monster stood straight up, its arms, which looked more like stubs, hung loosely by his side. The small little blobs continued to pour from the hole, all skittering in random directions along the roof.

Seeing that the creature before him wasn't Sam, Church fired his rifle, punching several rounds straight through to the creatures chest. Unfazed, it charged straight for him, flinging its arms around wildly. Church dived to the side, watching the monster jump straight, right past where he had stood. Standing straight, he rushed over to the puss covered brute, now flailing on the ground unable to regain its footing. Placing his boot on its back, Church pinned the thing to the ground, and fired continuously, only stopping when his heat sink had been filled. Luckily, the creature had stopped moving, seeming to be lifeless now.

Church's attention turned to the little blobs, now reaching the walls of the room and climbing down. He was surrounded, stuck in what appeared to be a hornet's nest. Panicking, Church fired on the few in front of him, before charging for the door. While he moved, he shot the little monsters in his path, all exploding like little firecrackers as he went.

Behind him, the blobs followed, their little appendages pattering across the floor. Continuously firing, both at the blobs in front of him and the few jumping up to him, Church entered the final hallway. Daylight could be seen ahead of him, creating a goal for him to push

to. Grunting back his exhaustion, he sprinted the last few feet to the door.

Jumping through the opening, he spotted Manny, sitting on a broken stump just outside the door.

Without pause, Church shouted, "Get up and help!"

Turning around to face the door, Church fired his Argus at the little creatures, just now reaching the daylight. His continuous fire, was soon joined by Manny's, who had jumped up immediately. The little monsters just kept coming, each one that fell, was quickly replaced by another, all popping with a whine and a hiss, before dying. Eventually, with their combined fire, the steady stream of creatures, lessened, until the only ones remaining, retreated back into the facility.

Finally free of his hell hole, Church gave a massive sigh of relief, grateful to just be alive.

Walking up to him, Manny looked between Church and the base's entrance. Taking off his helmet, Manny looked at Church puzzled.

"Where's Sam?" He asked, with an eye brow arched. "Church, what happened in there? You guys were gone for hours."

Manny's words caused Church to stop breathing suddenly. His chest constricted, and his vision darkened, the image of Samuel's demise playing through his mind. He had been so focused on only escaping, that he hadn't taken the time to mull over what had happened. And the thought of it, brought back the fear and sadness. The scene came rushing back to him, causing him to grow weak in the knees. This, combined with his physical exhaustion, caused Church to fall to the ground, completely unconscious.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Normandy landing sight<strong>

Gathered around the hanger bay of the \_Normandy\_, \_Shepard\_, Samantha, Joker, Ashley, and James, all watched as the floating alien zipped around, examining every piece of technology as it went. It was still night on their side of the Halo, and the large moon illuminated the outside nicely. Overhead, lights kept the ship from falling into darkness, much brighter now than they were before.

They had arrived only an hour ago, and already the Huragok had gone to work, floating around the \_Normandy\_ and playing with every bit of tech it could find. On the way back, it had been fiddling around with their armor and weapons, and the effect was immediate. Their clips had their heat sinking capabilities doubled, the weapons were lighter, stronger, and fired faster than they had thought possible. Everything the Engineer touched, seemed to turn to gold. Granted, instead of actual gold, the equipment just seemed vastly superior.

Sitting down on a crate, Joker was the first to speak, "Are we sure it's a good idea for it to be poking around on a highly advanced warship. Specifically, my warship."

It was EDI who answered him, "So long as the Covenant does not recapture him, he should prove to be an amazing asset to the ship and the crew."

\_"He?" James questioned, "How do you know that it's a he?"

"He told me. I allowed him to connect to my systems directly. It was nice talking to an equal. While he toyed with your omni-tools, he installed a communication program that should translate his hand signals. He prefers to be called 'Floats Wildly.'"

"We'll call him 'Wilds,'" James grunted.

"EDI, have 'Wilds' upgrade the weapons and armor, before he fixes the \_Normandy\_. I want to be ready, in case of an attack," Shepard ordered, turning to leave back for their base camp.

Before he was able to leave, Samantha spoke up, "Commander, we still haven't heard back from Church and his squad."

Once again, EDI was the one to respond. "My apologies, Specialist Traynor, I've been holding another conversation with Manny, simultaneous to this one. They should be here momentarily."

As if on cue, a yellow light appeared, just at the end of the ramp to the hanger, blinding the group with its stunning brilliance. Suddenly, it vanished, just as quickly as it had appeared. It took a moment for the crew's eyes to adjust, returning to the darkness of night.

Replacing the light, was Manny, carrying Church over his shoulder.

Looking to the group, Manny spoke with a tone of worry.

"We've may have a problem."

16. I ain't afraid of no Ghosts

\*\*Ch 16\*\*

\*\*I Ain't Afraid of no Ghost\*\*

\*\*Normandy medical bay\*\*

\*\*2 months before Reaper invasion.\*\*

Slowly, Church's world of darkness was replaced by a brilliant light. Blurry at first, but eventually divulging into the clear vision of the \_Normandy's\_ medical bay. It took him a moment to realize he wasn't alone. To the right of his bed was Manny and Shepard, whispering something to each other.

Taking notice of Church, Shepard looked up from his conversation. "He's awake."

Turning around to face him, Manny walked over to Church. He still wore his armor, the helmet on a table by the door. Looking over



himself, Church noticed that he too had his armor on, his helmet on the floor by the bed.

"Damn it Church, don't scare us like that!" Manny said, lightly punching him in the shoulder.

Church seemed unable to respond, choking on the words in his throat. Walking over next to him, Shepard held out his hand in a soothing manner.

"Easy there. Just take your time and breathe."

With his erratic heartbeat calming, Church took a moment to breathe and focus his thoughts.

"When every you're ready, we need to know what happened." Shepard spoke in a calm cool manner.

Keeping his gaze away from Shepard's and Manny's, Church focused on the blank wall in front of him.

"Sam and I, we ah... We went in to search the facility. Lot of blood, alien blood, everywhere." As he spoke, Church's pulse elevated. "When we got to to the back, found some sort of containers, filled with liquid. Covenant must of broken one of them, glass shards everywhere."

Pausing for a moment, Church's chest started to tighten up and constrict, as the memory resurfaced in his mind.

"Some disgusting blob thing, it got Sam. It didn't just kill him, it turned him into some kind of monster." Tears were forming in Church's eyes, as the vision of the wall and equipment morphed into the monster Samuel had become. "God damn it, I just left him back there. I led him in there and fucked him over."

His pulse was becoming chaotic now, growing stronger at an unusually fast rate.

Manny looked to the medical nurse who had just walked in. "He's going into shock! Put him under."

Without hesitation, the nurse walked over and placed a mask over Church's face.

"Commander, I'll keep him under anesthesia for a few hours. Do some scans and see if there's anything physically wrong with him," He said, watching as Church closed his eyes and drifted asleep.

"Thank you. And what was your name again?"

"Serviceman Bradley, sir. And not a problem, it's what I'm here for."

With that, Manny and Shepard walked out of the bay, and moved onto the elevator. They walked in silence, as they exited the hanger bay and entered the ruins. There were less wounded cluttering up the entrance, most were now moving about and assisting where they could. Even Erin, who had refused to rest any further, was on her feet and working.

Walking to the rear of the main room on the ground floor, the pair traveled up the stairs, until they reached the third and final floor, where Traynor had established a kind of command center in the small room. Awaiting them at the top, was Traynor, Joker, and Erin, all anxiously waiting for Shepard to return.

Noticing them enter, Erin spoke up, "Well? What did he say?"

"He uh. Erin he said that Sam wasâ€¦" Manny stuttered, unable to fathom the possibility of his friend's demise.

Shepard finished for him, "Samuel's dead," he said coldly.

"Holy shit," Joker stammered.

Without so much as a word, Erin rushed past Manny, exiting the room down the stairs. The others watched as she stormed off.

"But what has caused Church to go off the deep end?" Traynor asked Shepard.

It was EDI who answered, speaking through the holographic terminal on a table next to the wall. "I may have found a reason. My apologies, but I've been preoccupied, delving into the troupes of data on the Halo's computer."

"Just tell us what you can, EDI."

"I'm still not completely sure myself, but what Church and Samuel found, was a kind of advanced parasitic life form. This ring was built to contain and study it."

Confused, Joker looked to EDI's hologram. "Back up a minute. You need to fill us in a bit more here. I'm completely lost."

"I've only been able to piece together fragments myself. But from what I've uncovered, the creators of this ring; who called themselves the Forerunners; built the Halo in order to study the parasite, which they called 'The Flood'."

Crossing his arms, Shepard said, "The Flood? Doesn't sound too pleasant."

"Indeed it wasn't. Their medical records are incomplete, but it appears to be that the Flood feeds on organic sentient creatures, such as Humans. It's what caused the Forerunner's extinction 100,000 years ago."

"And how does the Covenant fit into all of this?" Traynor asked.

"They believe the Halo will bring them transcendence. Meaning, they are blind to its true purpose."

"So this massive thing was only build to study a parasite?"

"No, it has another purpose of some sort. I simply haven't been able to figure out what exactly."

Rubbing his chin, Shepard started thinking for a moment. "You said 100,000 years ago. The Reapers are supposed to come every 50,000 years, their extinction matches up perfectly for the Reapers' cycle."

"Yes, but the Forerunners hold no record of the Reapers or anything relating to them. And there has been no Prothean data indicating their existence. We are the first ones to know of their species, aside from the Covenant."

Shepard shook his head clear, "There are too many questions here, not enough answers. As soon as that Engineer has fixed the\_ Normandy\_, we're getting out of here."

"Shepard, that might not be the wisest course of action. If the Covenant have released the Flood from containment, that parasite could potentially find its way to Human worlds."

Sounding worried, Manny spoke up, "And what do you want us to do, EDI?"

"The Halo was built with a kind of failsafe, one that should allow you to destroy any Flood organisms on this facility."

"What kind of failsafe?" Shepard asked, looking crossed towards EDI.

"I don't know for certain. My access to the Forerunner information is still limited, at best. What I do know, is that, in order for it to activate, you need to acquire something called the 'Activation Index'."

"Activation Index?" Joker questioned, "Why is it everything here has to have some bizarre cryptic name. Can't for once they just have something called 'Big gun device'."

Smiling a bit, Shepard answered him, "If only it were that easy, Joker."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>Nothing much to update you folks about. Once I'm deeper into the story, I'll start giving out more news as to what's going on. In the meantime, please leave a review and let me know what you think so far. Give your thoughts, opinions, ideas, anything you want to tell me about this story. Hell, just type in a period so I know you read the thing.

And as always, thanks for reading.

## 17. Start of the Apocalypse

\*\*AN: \*\*It used to be I could get at least one review/fav/follow every time I posted a chapter. Now, it seems that, even though the writing has gotten better, the story seems to be disliked among you readers. Oh well, I'm going to finish it, whether you bastards like it or not (I jest of course).

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ch 17<strong>

**\*\*Start of the Apocalypse\*\***

**\*\*Normandy landing site\*\***

**\*\*2 months before Reaper invasion\*\***

The evening sun glowed bright upon the Normandy and her crew, most of whom, were sitting about sharing personal worries or debating their current predicament. Everyone was aware of the growing danger posed by the Halo. It seemed that everyday they spent stranded, another life threatening predicament would arise. And the recent discovery of the Flood, had proven to be the tipping point.

Sitting on folding chair in Tarynor's control room, Shepard pondered over what the next move should be. Looking back to the data EDI had discovered, he grumbled, musing over the idea of just abandoning the Halo entirely.

Shepard sat there, reading over the intel and sipping his coffee, unable to reach a verdict on what to do. Suddenly, his choice didn't matter.

EDI's hologram appeared before him. "Shepard, the drones have picked up movement outside our perimeter. The Covenant are approaching, and they're bringing an army. They will be here within the next two hours" EDI said, as her hologram was replaced. In its wake, there was a map of the Halo's surface, showing the Normandy and the surrounding forests. Little red dots could be seen travelling closer to them.

Without responding, Shepard jumped out of his seat and rushed down stairs. As he walked, EDI had managed to alert the entire crew, who were running around arming themselves with whatever weapons they could. It seemed like a mad house, almost a hundred people all rushing to some kind of safety. Pushing through the frantic crowd, Shepard managed to find Ashley, who was standing outside, ready to fire at any moment.

Coming up to her, Shepard grabbed her arm, and forced her to turn to him. With her attention focused on him, Shepard grabbed his pistol, and shot it into the air. The following sound resounded across the base camp, causing everyone to stop their actions immediately.

Turning to face the crowd, Shepard said, "Listen up people. Get everything you can, and load it back onto the ship. We're only taking the necessities. If you don't need it, don't grab it. Wounded come aboard first, then everyone else can return to your station aboard the Normandy." The Engineer we rescued," Shepard thought for a moment, wondering if the word rescue was appropriate, "has managed to repair the ship into working order."

The crowd just starred at the commander, still expecting him to continue with his command.

"Let's go! Get to work folks," Ashley yelled, voicing Shepard's thoughts. Turning from the crowd back to Shepard, Ashley asked, "What

about the Flood? That thing EDI was talking about. Traynor said you were coming up with some kind of plan."

Grinning, Shepard looked at her. "You worry about getting everyone out of here alive. She's up and running, stealth drives should allow you to escape the system. The only thing not working is the long range communications. But 'Wilds' can fix that later."

Ashley looked at him with a face of concern. "And what are you going to do?"

"Sorry Ash, looks like you get to miss out on another suicide mission."

"Shepard, no!" She shouted defiantly.

"I need you to take the \_Normandy\_ back to Earth. We still have to worry about the damn Reapers too. I don't trust anyone else to do it, someone has to keep an eye on Joker. I'll find a way off this place, after I deal with the Flood."

"You can't be serious, Shepard. You want to stay here alone? This can't be your actual plan!"

"More of like an improvisation," Shepard said, turning to enter the ship's hanger bay. "Besides, we need everyone possible back home, preparing our defenses."

Before he could walk off, Ashley grabbed him by the collar of his black jacket. Dazed, he was taken aback when Ashley forced him closer to her. Leaning her face closer to his, Shepard was further dumbfounded, when he found her lips pressed against his.

Pulling herself away, Ashley looked him in the eyes. "Just come back alive, Skipper. I lost you once, I don't want to do it again."

Unwilling to wait for a response, she turned and walked into the structure, leaving Shepard alone and confused.

Dodging past the crew moving crates, Shepard forced his way into the armory. It took him a moment, but he was able to find his armor and Mattock, both recently upgraded by the Huragok. Pulling off his jacket, he fit himself into the black breast piece, followed by the gauntlets and boots. By now, Joker had managed to find him.

Hobbling off the elevator, Joker moved over to Shepard, who was leaning against a terminal looking over his gun.

"God damn it, some jack ass caused me to sprain my ankle. What's with all the commotion?"

Looking up from his rifle, Shepard eyed him. "Sleeping on the job again, Joker? Covenant has found us, they'll be here in about an hour. Trying to salvage what we can here."

Joker's usual smiling face, was wiped clean by fear. "Holy shit. What are you doing then?"

"Someone's got to stay and activate this thing. Can't risk the

Covenant fucking us all over and releasing yet another galactic problem for me to fix later." Looking over Joker, he could tell what his pilot was about to say. "Don't bothering trying, Ashley already did. I'll be back Joker. Worse thing that could happen is Cerberus has to rebuild me again."

This seemed to calm Joker down a bit. "Alright then, you're funeral. I'm gonna go make sure Cortez hasn't messed with my seat." He turned to walk away, "Just don't die on us, Commander. We still need your help for the Reapers. Hell, I still need you. Who else will boss me around with that same charisma?" And with that, Joker returned to the elevator.

Returning to his work, Shepard grabbed a large backpack off the ground. It was metallic, with two adjustable straps made from a hard plastic. The pack contained one massive pocket, which Shepard stuffed with thermal clips and food.

Finally packed, he activated his omni-tool to contact EDI.

"How far does the \_Normandy \_have to be, before I lose connection with you?"

It took a moment for her to respond, "I've instructed Wilds to repair my long range communicator first. With his upgrades, we shouldn't have a problem communicating for several light years. Though I won't have access to the Halo's major systems, such as the teleportation network."

Looking over the bay, Shepard spotted the purple Ghost, still glistening in the sunlight. "Don't worry about that. I just need to know where I'm going, and how I'm getting off this thing."

Grabbing his helmet, Shepard walked over to the alien vehicle. Swinging his leg over one side, he squatted into the seat, familiarizing himself with the controls. It seemed to work just like an old Human motorcycle, only it possessed the ability to shoot highly volatile plasma cannons.

Placing the helmet on his head, Shepard activated the Ghost. The machine immediately jumped off the ground, hovering in place just above the floor. By now, the crew had grabbed what they needed, and the bay was empty, except for him.

Slowly, he walked the Ghost to the end of the still open ramp, before stopping one last time to just gawk at his ship. The truth was, Shepard had no intention of returning alive. This would be the last time he would risk his neck to save an ungrateful galaxy, one that had often wished he stayed dead. He knew Ashley would be able to handle the Reapers, he didn't know how, just that she would do as good as job as he would.

Before he was able to drive away, his omni-tool beeped with a video call. By instinct, Shepard activated the device, and accepted the call. The fiery face of Erin appeared on his screen.

\_"Commander Shepard? I've been informed that you plan on staying here all by your lonesome?"\_

Grunting, Shepard responded, "Yes. You and your squad will be needed

on Earth. I can handle it here."

\_"With all due respect, sir, that's the stupidest excuse for wanting to get yourself killed."\_

Taking back with surprise, he chose his response carefully. "You don't have to agree with my orders. Just follow them. Shepard out."

Shutting off his omni-tool, Shepard activated the Ghost's thrust, and flew the vehicle out of sight into the forests, stopping just past the tree line. Looking back, he watched as the \_Normandy \_floated up into the sky, retracting her landing gear as she did so. Turning to face the horizon, the ship angled its engines, and launched into the sky. Leaving no trace of its presence.

Now Shepard was alone. And now, more than ever, he missed his crew.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>A few hours later<strong>

Sitting on the ground, and leaning against a tree, Shepard rummaged through his pack. It was dark now, and he was forced to search without anything other than the moonlight. He didn't wish to risk a chance of the Covenant finding his light, and then him.

Finally, he managed to find a ration bar. Peeling off the wrapper, Shepard gobbled up the meal in seconds. Taking a satisfying swig of his canteen, he let loose a relaxed sigh.

After taking a moment to listen into the dead of night, he activated his omni-tool, only after he was sure there was no one to find him.

"EDI? EDI, do you read me?"

Static was his only response. Trying again, Shepard attempted to boost his signal strength a tad.

This time a voice came in through the noise, \_"Shepard. I've sent everything I can to your omni-tool. You'll have to figure out what to do, once you have the index."\_

"Are you all in FTL headed home?"

It took a moment, but EDI's response came through, \_"Yes... to a point. Joker seems unwilling to travel past the edge of the system. We're..." \_

Her signal was lost through interference. It didn't matter to Shepard though. His crew and ship was safe, at least for the time being. And now, he had a destination for his mission. All he needed, was a little time, and a whole lot of luck.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>I truly can't stress this enough folks, but please leave some reviews. They are extremely helpful to my writing,

and they give me the courage to continue this series.

With this update, I do have some news to report. I've decided that this story will evolve into a series, one that will expand the universe I want to build. It will inspire one shot spin offs, as well as a full fledged sequel. Not to mention, there will also be an RP set in the timeline after this story. This RP is currently being constructed by me and a friend. I hope you all will help to make this possible =).

And as always, thanks for reading.

## 18. Key of the Apocalypse

**\*\*Ch 18\*\***

**\*\*Key of the Apocalypse\*\***

**\*\*Normandy\*\***

**\*\*2 months before Reaper invasion\*\***

"Joker, are all systems reporting green?" Ashley asked the pilot. She stood at the head of the conference room table, going over a data pad in front of her.

"Everything's running smooth for now. I'll let you know if anything changes." He responded through the ship's speakers.

Sighing, Ashley looked over to James, who was sitting on a stool to the side of the table looking over her.

"You going to be okay, Lola?" James questioned, seeing the doubt in her eyes.

"No. Damn it, why is Shepard such a stubborn prick." She slammed her fist onto the table, causing her drink to spill. Neither one of them moved to clean up the mess, only standing in the silence that followed.

Finally speaking up, James said, "Ya know, we could always go back for him. Man may be loco, doesn't mean he can do all of this alone."

"An order is an order," She grumbled, resenting the military doctrine that had been instilled upon her. "I don't even know why I let Joker convince me to stay in the system."

James sighed in grief, "Why did he insist on doing this alone? Shepard's never gone in without some kind of team to back him up."

Gripping the sides of her head in frustration, Ashley responded, "I don't know. Maybe for the same reason he was so absent minded before. Shepard's always had a lot to deal with, but this just seems ridiculous."

Standing up, James walked over and placed his arm around her shoulder. "Joker seems to believe that he'll be okay, otherwise he



would never have left. Maybe we just need to trust the Commander. He has literally been to hell and back. If anyone can do this, he can."

The pair was interrupted by the doors to the security room sliding open. As they opened, they revealed Erin, followed closely by Manny. She walked in, her strut just screamed with anger and frustration.

Walking up to the table, she turned to Ashley. "So what. That's the end of it then? Just going to leave the bastard to die?"

"Watch your tone," Ashley barked back to her, standing up straight and shrugging James off of her. "Shepard has seen more shit than you ever will."

Erin just scoffed at her. "I don't doubt that, but he's obviously got a screw loose now. We need to go back and finish the job."

Glaring at her, Ashley continued. "He gave us an order. He tells us to do something, and we just do it. That's the way the military works."

"Well fuck the fucking military!" Erin screamed.

Her tone had startled Manny, who tried to figure out how to calm her down.

"Erin," He stammered, "You're drunk, and still pissed about Sam."

The only response she gave, was a shrill laugh. "Doesn't matter about that. You know I'm right, why else would you be here with me."

"Just get out," Ashley screamed, pointing to the door as she did so.

"Church has the same rank as you, and I get my orders from him. So who decided to make you queen of the ship?" Erin asked mockingly

"Excuse me?" Ashley walked over to her, fist clenched in rage. Pulling her fist back to swing, she was stopped cold by James pulling her back. Just now realizing what was about to happen, Erin tried jumping at her, but was stopped as Manny picked her up and dragged her away.

"Easy ladies," James said, struggling to keep Ashley at bay. "We've all been under a lot of stress." His attempts at diplomacy failed, and caused Ashley to push away with more strength. Turning to Manny, he said, "Get her out of here."

Manny nodded in acknowledgement, before carrying a screaming and kicking Erin out the door. Her shouts could still be heard from down the hall.

Now alone, Ashley regained her composure enough to be let go. Picking up the data pad, she started to head for the War Room, but was stopped by James.

"Lola, you know she has a point."

Ashley stopped dead, turning around to face James. "Yes I know. But it was \_Shepard's \_order. What am I supposed to do, go against the will of the Great Commander Shepard?"

Coming closer to her, James placed his hand on her shoulder, bringing her up to face him. "If I remember my vids correctly, didn't Shepard defeat Saren by breaking orders?"

Giggling a bit, Ashley smiled as she remembered the first suicide mission she had embarked upon with Shepard. "Alright, just one question. What's with the 'Lola'?"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Surface of Halo<strong>

Somewhere, in the thick forest on Halo's surface, rain poured through the canopy of leaves, falling atop Shepard. Repacking his supplies, Shepard grabbed his helmet off the Ghost, and slid it back onto his head, making sure to secure it tight. He had been travelling for hours now, unable to stop long enough to sleep. So far, the Covenant hadn't found him, though there had been several close calls.

Now, he was just outside the entrance of yet another temple like structure. However, this time there was no elaborate facility above ground, just a door, leading into a small ramp. Sitting back down on his Ghost, Shepard inched the vehicle forward to the door, while the storm above continued to drench him. The door was just wide enough for him to push the Ghost into it. Luckily for him, there wasn't a single alien in sight.

After ensuring the small wingspan would fit through, Shepard activated the boost, and zoomed down the hall way at a surprisingly quick pace. The door led to a single ramp, that went down into the core of the ring. Small neon like lights illuminated the floor, showing a clear path for Shepard to follow.

\_God this had better end soon, \_Shepard thought to himself. To his surprise, up ahead appeared the end of his road. The hallway opened up into a massive chamber. Ahead of him was a continuation of his platform, a thin walkway over a seemingly endless abyss below. To his left and right, the path forked, going along the wall in another cat walk. They continued straight, perpendicular to the path Shepard was on, until they reached a wall. Then they took a sharp turn, running parallel to the center path, ending with a large square platform.

Though Shepard wasn't very concerned with the room's architecture. Instead, he was focused solely on the group of aliens directly ahead of him. For their part, they had noticed Shepard the moment he entered the room, but were stunned to see a Ghost appear before them. This caused them to hesitate, it was only after noticing the occupant was Human, did they bother to act.

Shepard was surprised as well, not expecting there to be any actual danger down under the surface of the ring. Only after the Grunts opened fire, did he instinctively fire back.

The Ghost's weapons fired roiling hot plasma at the nearest Grunt, who's flesh burned and fused with the breathing apparatus on his face. Seeing the first Grunt fall, Shepard focused his fire on another. By now the Covenant were focusing their fire on the vehicle, causing Shepard to duck behind the large bulge in front of the craft.

The Ghost was designed to take fire from ahead, the dense purple armor covering the engine and anti-gravity generator was able to protect against the small arms fire. However, after the alien's continuous barrage, parts started to bend and melt away. Noticing the damage to his ride, Shepard decided to move, lest he be blown to smithereens.

Activating the boost, Shepard shot the Ghost straight ahead, knocking down and killing a shield wearing Jackle. He continued traveling forward, careful to keep his body as close to the center of the vehicle as possible. Ahead of him, two Elites rolled out of the way, barely avoiding becoming roadkill. Quickly, they recovered and were back on their feet firing at Shepard's rear.

Reaching the end of the catwalk, it suddenly stopped leading straight down into nothing, Shepard turned the Ghost around, swinging the back end over the edge as he did so. He revved the engine, preparing for another charge at the aliens. Hitting the thrust, Shepard zoomed forward as plasma fire sailed around and past him. Looking over the Ghost's hood, he saw one Elite prepare to dodge his ram again, but was stopped as Shepard cut the boost and opened fire instead. In a matter of seconds, the Elite lost its shields and was falling to the ground with severe burns.

Unfortunately for Shepard, he had let the second Elite out of his sights. Without warning, the second Elite jumped from across the walkway, straight for Shepard. Grabbing hold of him, the Elite tackled Shepard to the ground, removing him from the Ghost and losing his own helmet in the process. With no passenger being sensed within the vehicle, the Ghost immediately shut down once its seat was void of any occupant.

Stunned, Shepard tried to shove the massive alien off of him. Struggling with the Human below him, the Elite tried to pin him to the ground, but was instead stunned by a fist to his split jaw.

Now both of them struggled to get the upper hand on the other, rolling across the walkway like children in play. Shifting his weight, Shepard was able to switch the Elite to his back, much to his surprise. Continuing with his momentum, Shepard started wailing punch after punch into the alien's neck and face. He cringed as his knuckles made contact with the alien flesh. Gaining momentum, the Elite swung his hips, causing Shepard to fall off. Wishing to continue with his advantage, the Elite jumped on top of the Commander, pinning him by the neck with his left hand.

Struggling to breathe, Shepard feigned to pull himself free of his attackers grip. He tried pulling away the four fingers, but they were gripped firmly around his wind pipe. Gasping for air, the Commander watched as the Elite made a fist with his free hand, and a plasma knife protruded from the gauntlet bound on his forearm.

"I shall enjoy this, Human," The Elite growled, basking in the

helplessness of his victim. "You have fought well, honorably even. It has been long since I've feared for my life. Alas, I am the victor, as my people will always be."

Suddenly, Shepard's face of panic turned into a smile. Grinning, he said, "I wouldn't bet on it," and watched, as one of the small flood blobs, attached itself to his neck.

The Elite screamed in agony, realizing far too late he now faced a state of peril. Digging into the alien, the small blob dug through flesh and muscle, spewing blood and puss as it went. Falling to his side, the Elite released Shepard from his grasp, and curled himself into a shriveling ball. Climbing to his feet, Shepard backed away from the alien dying on the floor.

Disgusted by the sight before him, Shepard pulled out his Mattock, which had amazingly stayed on his back during the struggle. Looking around the open room, he noticed more of the Flood blobs coming in his direction. Some were scurrying themselves up onto the central walkway, where a dozen alien bodies lay dead. All the while, the Elite's screams filled the air.

Glancing back to the still struggling alien, Shepard noticed he now looked at him. The little black beads that served as eyes, stared up at him with extreme pain and sorrow. His odd mandibles tried to mouth a sentence or phrase, one that Shepard's translator was unable to detect.

"Kill me, please!" The Elite shouted, desperately trying to end the suffering he endured. Taking pity on the poor bastard, Shepard aimed and squeezed the trigger, piercing his skull with a bullet. The Flood didn't even seem to notice.

Now Shepard started to worry. Instead of just abandoning the corpse or dying with it, like Shepard had assumed would happen, the little blob just continued to dig into the body, causing it to twitch and gain unnatural growths in response.

"So that's what happened to Sam," He said as he turned to shoot the infection blob dead. More of the small Flood started scurrying down the walls, reaching the central platform where a dozen alien bodies lay dead. "Shit, now how do I get out?" Shepard grumbled to himself.

Green Flood monsters were crawling through the room now, traveling down the central path directly towards him. They seemed endless, daunting in their swarm like behavior. Only able to focus on the insect like forms closest to him, Shepard was left completely unaware as the corpses behind them started to rise. First it was the Elite, who twisted his waist into a sitting position. Then, without the use of his arms, he twisted his body so that his spine was properly realigned. It snapped with a revolting crunch. Standing up, it charged at Shepard, who had no choice but to shoot back in response.

The waves of monsters seemed endless, almost hopeless from his position. Slapping in a fresh clip, Shepard started walking back, careful to step over the body behind him. After another full clip, the Elite monster fell to the ground, just as a dozen more of the small blobs traveled across his body, desperate to reach Shepard for

some reason. Grabbing his sidearm, Shepard pulled out his Eagle pistol. Firing rapid burst rounds at the ground seemed to help, but the sheer numbers of Flood seemed to negate his chances. The walls themselves, now looked like rapidly moving green waves.

\_So this is how it ends? Not a big ass explosion, no giant alien monsters, not even the Reapers were able to do me in. But fucking zombie plants? First day with these, and I'm already screwed.\_

Closing his eyes, Shepard braced himself as the nearest blob launched itself at his face, only to be stopped by a blinding light. Surprised he wasn't in pain, Shepard opened his eyes, half expecting the \_Normandy \_crew to be there saving him. Instead, he found little flying drones destroying the Flood like they were no more than pops in bubble wrap. Each creature died with a satisfying screech and pop, like the oddly satisfying sound of popping a zit.

"Sentinels," Shepard said to himself. "Never thought I'd see the day where robots actually save my life."

A voice came from behind him, "I was hoping it wouldn't need saving, Reclaimer."

Spinning around, Shepard found another machine floating above him. Unlike the Sentinels, this one was small, in comparison at least. In actuality, it was probably larger than a Human head. It seemed to look like an eye, with a metallic ring surrounding a glowing blue orb, that blinked as the device spoke.

"My apologies, Reclaimer. You are probably confused, lost from the long journey you have come. But there isn't much time to just stand by and explain everything. We must contain the Flood outbreak."

Shepard shook his head in disbelief, he took off his helmet to make sure his eyes weren't deceiving him. The device seemed to know him, or of him, and its voice seemed to change pitch mid sentence, creating the odd sense of talking to a child.

"And you are?" Shepard asked, an eyebrow raised.

"343 Guilty Spark. I was commissioned as caretaker of Installation 04 of the Halo array. I appreciate your questions, Reclaimer, but we really must hurry. Time is of the utmost essence."

The path before Shepard, and behind the eye, suddenly illuminated with a glowing blue bridge. Without pause, the caretaker turned its little body around and flew down the way. Taking a quick peak behind him, Shepard saw the Sentinels had managed to either burn or scare the remaining Flood away, leaving him with an odd sense of security and calm.

"Hey Sparks, wait up," Shepard said, jogging onto the light bridge to catch up. He seemed perplexed for a moment, the feeling of touching the solid hologram like material seemed to perplex him. "Where are we going?"

Coming up from behind him, the eye floated right next to Shepard's shoulder.

"An excellent question, Reclaimer. Wishing to know if my consciousness has been damaged by the Flood? I'm glad my masters were wise enough to leave your kind in charge. We're going to retrieve the Activation Index, which you will use to activate the Halo's defense network, and kill the Flood."

"Yeah, just testing you," Shepard said, deciding it best to play along with the AI. "So if you are the caretaker of this ring, why weren't you able to stop the Flood already?"

The eye continued without missing a beat, "Because my creators did not trust me with such a task. They thought it best that you, Reclaimers, decide when to best activate the Halo array. But with the recent Flood outbreak, I'm afraid we have no choice. They have already overrun most of the organic outpost set up by the Covenant. And they've destroyed my drone production facility. If we do not act quick, they will finish building a Gravemind. By then, we shall all be in danger."

Shepard shook his head clear, unable to understand completely what the machine was talking about. However, after a moment more of walking across the bridge in silence, they arrived at a small circular platform. On it, was a bundle of small hexagon like pillars, that only reached to shoulder level. A single holographic monitor appeared. Pressing the only button the monitor showed, Shepard watched as one pillar, in the middle of the bundle, rose out of the group. It opened up to reveal a small metal device, in the shape of a small "T".

"That, Reclaimer, will be able to solve all of your problems."

## 19. Spirit in the Sky

**\*\*Ch 19\*\***

**\*\*Spirit in the Sky\*\***

**\*\*Halo Facility\*\***

**\*\*2 months before Reaper invasion\*\***

Shifting his weight to the other leg, Shepard looked up at the mechanical eye. Gripping the piece of metal in his hands, he pondered over what would happen, should he activate the the ring's systems. Something didn't seem right about all of this.

"What would happen if the weapon failed?" asked an inquisitive Shepard.

"This facility has undergone 7,042 virtual firings. Not once has it failed. However, in the event of a failure, the Flood will escape this facility, and assimilate all sentient life they can find." The monitor seemed absent, as if its processing power was busy with another situation.

"Assimilate?" Shepard asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You ask many questions, Reclaimer. The Flood forms you have so far

encountered, are nothing more than infection and combat forms. When they gather enough organic material, they create a central intelligence known as a Gravemind."

\_Gravemind, this is sounding worse than the Reapers, \_Shepard thought to himself.

The monitor turned to look at Shepard. "Brace yourself now, Reclaimer. We must hurry to the command center."

Without warning, a bright yellow light surrounded both Shepard and the eye. Flashing brightly, Shepard's view of the room was completely lost in light. A sudden flash of light was all he could see, soon replaced with the bitter cold and darkness.

They stood now in a canyon, surrounded on all sides by massive rock walls. Their tops were covered in snow, as was the ground Shepard stood on. He could feel the temperature drop, well below the point of freezing. It wasn't long, however, until his suit's environmental controls warmed his body.

\_That little Engineer was even able to fix the heater in here. Tali would love to have one of him around.\_

"This way, Reclaimer." The AI floated over Shepard's head, moving straight for the far side of the canyon. The machine seemed to be enjoying its little stroll, humming a tune as it went. Shepard followed close behind, careful to watch for enemies, in case of an ambush.

Finally they appeared at a door within the folds of the rock. It was another metal door, with the same sharp angle design Shepard had become accustomed to on all of the Forerunner's architecture.

Turning to Shepard, the monitor said, "One moment, I must move to open this door manually. The system has gone into lock down due to the Flood outbreak." The eye floated away, humming a seemingly random tune as it did so.

Again, Shepard was left with his thoughts. Nothing but the wind to drown out the sounds of his own mental voice. Suddenly, there was another noise to drain out the sound. There came the light sound of snow, crunching beneath the weight of heavy feet. Looking behind him, Shepard spotted the cause of the disturbance.

Charging towards him, were two of the large infected Flood forms, Elites from their general shape and size. Unflinching, Shepard pulled out his Mattock, firing on the first creature. His rifle had much more power behind it now than before, he was able to down the monster in only a few shots. The next one quickly followed. Soon, another monster came around the curve in the canyon wall, bringing with him several of the small infection blob creatures.

Remaining calm, Shepard focused his fire, shooting down the larger Combat Form, which exploded in a mixture of puss and green skin like material. After finishing the retreating blobs, he had only gone through one thermal-clip, which popped out of his rifle, melting the snow it touched.

Clicking in one of his many remaining clips, Shepard smiled for a moment.

\_This parasite isn't so bad. Might not even need to activate anything after all, \_he thought to himself. For some reason, Shepard actually liked the idea of taking on an underwhelming enemy, one that wouldn't require a suicide mission that put all of his crew at risk.

Yet another sound came in through the wind, a grossly deep wail from somewhere in the canyon. The first scream was accompanied by more, all roaring in unison, like a pack of sick and starving wolves. It wasn't long before dozens of twisted and deformed Elites started charging Shepard, some even falling from the top of the rock walls.

"Shit," Shepard grunted, kneeling to his knee. He opened up fire, dropping down four of them before having to reload. There wasn't much of a space between he and the monsters, and despite his best efforts, it was shortening quickly. All of a sudden, plasma fire was sailing past Shepard's head, burning the rock and snow behind him. Weapons fire seemed to be coming out more frequently now, with some shots being fired randomly into the air, while others still were aimed at him.

A voice brought Shepard out of the heat of combat.

"Through here, Reclaimer."

Looking behind him, Shepard saw the door open, with his new companion waiting in the hallway beyond. Demoralized by the horde in front of him, Shepard turned and sprinted for the open door. It quickly slid shut behind him, with the Flood banging on it from the other side.

"It will only be a matter of time before they reach us, and there are already Flood forms in this facility as well. I fear you have a fight ahead of you, Reclaimer." The eye started its motion forward, into the dimly lit hallway. Unlike some of the other facilities rather small linear halls, this one was rather open and large, almost inviting, if it weren't for the dim red light that illuminated their path.

Following close behind, Shepard kept his rifle raised, ready for anything else to pop out. He looked towards the monitor and asked, "Reclaimer, why do you keep calling me that?"

"My apologies, I shouldn't have expected you to know everything my creators left for you immediately."

As they walked, they passed several hallways, all branching out into other parts of the Halo's underbelly. It was an elaborate network of tunnels and passage ways. Some were designed to be impossible to traverse, all in an elaborate attempt to slow down any possible Flood outbreak. Finally, they reached another door, one that did not open immediately as Shepard approached.

"What do we do now?" Shepard asked an empty room. The eye had floated away, leaving him no response or idea of what to do. "Great, I'm actually missing my talks with Legion now. At least he, or they, never left me hanging."



The now eerily familiar sound of little legs, inched their way into Shepard's ears. The blobs were coming back, and they weren't trying to hide. Spotted, they quickly started charging Shepard, uncaring of their own safety. None of them were able to get close, partly due to Shepard's quick firing and the Sentinel machines, which appeared to be chasing the small horde.

"The door should be open now, Reclaimer."

Shepard stepped up to the door, which opened as he neared. Spark was waiting for him on the other side, still humming his infuriating tune.

"I'm happy to report, that the next few doors shouldn't require any kind of manual over ride." Looking away from Shepard, the AI continued forward, seemingly oblivious to any possibility of danger.

Sprinting to catch up, Shepard kept his eyes trained ahead of him. He was growing tired of the constant monster parties trying to kill him. Aliens and robots he could handle, sentient eating parasites were another threat entirely.

"You never finished answering me from before. About the Reclaimers."

"Ah yes, my mistake. My creators, the Forerunners, intended to have your species be the one to reclaim the Mantle. Why your species exactly, I'm not entirely sure. Personally, I would have chosen the Argonians. According to my records, they were a rather intelligent species. Wonder what happened to them?"

Pausing for a moment, Shepard thought about the machine's words, pondering over their possible meaning. "Back track a minute, they chose us for what?"

"The Mantle, they wanted Humanity to inherit their Mantle of Responsibility. I myself am not quite sure what it means, but they wanted you reclaim their lost empire, which includes every piece of technology they left behind."

"So a Human is required to activate the Halo? That's why you never bothered to talk to the Covenant?"

"There would be no point, Reclaimer. They have a gross misinterpretation of the Forerunner's purpose. Here we are."

They had arrived to a vastly open room, one that dwarfed everywhere Shepard had seen before. It seemed to be the control center, the entire thing looked solely focused on a console at the center of the room. Towering over the console, was a complicated mess of holographic symbols and messages, all pointing at different portions of a holographic ring. Walking into the center of the room, Shepard looked over the console before him, struggling to make sense of anything leading up to this point.

In the dead center of the terminal before him, Shepard found a circular holographic symbol, it held an image of the key above it.

"So just put the thing in there?" questioned Shepard.

The eye nodded in response, moving its entire body to assure him he was correct.

Shrugging, Shepard removed the piece of metal from his belt. He gripped the device in his hand, holding it by the top with the long piece protruding from his fingers.

\_Damn, this seems so easy, \_he thought to himself, as he moved his hand over the console.

He was never given the chance to place the key into the console. Before his hand had reached the device, the radio in his helmet started to buzz. Softly at first, it grew to an incredibly loud and obnoxious noise.

Suddenly, a voice came through the sound.

\_"Shepard! Do not activate the Halo's defense array."\_

Stunned, Shepard moved his hand away from the terminal. Placing his free hand to his ear, he shouted into his radio. "EDI? I thought you said this was the only way to get rid of the Flood?"

The only response he received was static, which buzzed away in his ear. After a moment, EDI was able to respond. \_"I didn't know it at the time, but the Halo array doesn't simply destroy the Flood. It destroys their food source."\_

\_"Shepard, it can destroy all sentient life in the galaxy."\_

Looking towards the eye, Shepard holstered the key and drew his Eagle, aiming it in the machine's general direction.

"You knew what this thing did! You never thought to mention that."

Unflinching, the AI spoke plainly. "I was under the impression that you knew, Reclaimer. You never bothered to ask. I take it you will not activate the installation?"

"Are you serious?! I was trying to save the galaxy, not kill everyone in it."

"Then your decision is made. I will be forced to find a way to activate the array, without your assistance," Sparks said, as it floated away, too quick for Shepard to react. In its absence, Sentinels took up position, floating above Shepard's head.

"Shit," he grunted. He had expected to die there, charred to a pile of ashes by the circle of machines charging weapons above him. Abruptly, a familiar flash of light encircled Shepard, stopping his death short. Somehow, Halo's teleportation system was saving him and sending him away from danger. Unfortunately, he had no idea of where.

Once the lights had passed, and the short bit of unease that followed, Shepard took in his new surroundings. Now he stood among

trees, surrounding him on all sides. He was in a forest, back on the ring's surface.

Taking off his helmet, Shepard activated his omni-tool, hoping to regain a connection to EDI.

"EDI, please tell me that was you?"

\_"It was, Shepard. I've been able to establish a stable connection to some of the Halo's operating systems again. Thanks in no small part to Floats Wildly."\_

Exhausted, Shepard found himself a seat on fallen tree, rejoicing in the ability to rest for a moment. "Are you still in system?" he asked aloud.

\_"Yes, for now. There has been some argument on whether or not to leave you behind."\_

Shepard sighed, realizing that he would never have to worry about his friends abandoning him, even when he asked for it.

"Are they aware you can reach me?"

\_"No. None of them have bothered to try, or ask."\_

"Good, let's keep it that way. Any idea on what to do next? I've got nothing."

\_"Though it will be difficult, that AI you met earlier, will eventually find a way to fire the Halo himself. I can tell he's searching for a way around the security settings, and trying to bypass the system to recognize a Human for activation."\_

"If only the Illusive Man knew about this. The whole 'Reclaimer' thing would boost his already inflated ego," Shepard scoffed.

\_"Yes I was able to listen in on most of your conversation. Reaching you was the most challenging part," \_EDI seemed distracted for a moment, as if talking to someone else simultaneously. \_"Alright! I'll ask. Wilds has requested that I ask how your equipment handled during combat? These things love to see the fruits of their labor."\_

Chuckling, Shepard answered. "Tell him my Mattock has never been better. Now, focus on what I need to do."

\_"I'm trying, Shepard. This thing is highly persistent, but it appears he may have a possible solution."\_

Perking himself up, he said, "I'm listening."

\_"As you are aware, the Flood have already spread into a considerable size over Halo's surface. Simply leaving them is not a valid option. However, we can not activate the weapon designed to destroy them for obvious reason. This leaves us with one option, we need to destroy the ring entirely. It will prevent its activation, and wipe out any Flood before they can pose an actual threat."\_

"I don't have a grenade that big, EDI. Hope your friend has some kind

of device for me to do this?"

\_"Wilds wishes to board and use the Covenant frigate, the one you boarded previously, and set its FTL drive to fail. This would cause an explosion large enough to destroy the entire facility."\_

Pondering over the plan, Shepard thought for a moment. They lacked any real options, and were still without any possible communications to Anderson or Hackett. Meaning that the lives of every living being in the galaxy rested solely on his shoulders. Nothing out of the ordinary for Commander Shepard.

"He's staying up there, too valuable an asset to lose. Send me data on how to do it, and I will see to it myself. Meanwhile, you will find a way to get Joker and the crew back into FTL, and back home. I won't be risking their lives on this, not when I can do it alone."

\_"Shepard, are you positive about this? Jeff and everyone would..."\_

"Yes I'm sure!" Shepard interrupted. "Now get it done, Shepard out."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Normandy<strong>

Standing in the cockpit behind the pilot's seat, Ashley looked at the window, admiring the twinkling of stars and lights. The system's sun was behind them, shining an orange glow throughout the ship.

"That's all he said?" Ashley asked EDI's hologram.

"Yes," she responded coldly.

Joker mused over his console, resting his head on his hand as his elbow pressed into the his chair's arm.

"What's with Shepard anyway?" he asked to no one in particular. "Did you do something else to piss him off, Ash?"

"No," Ashley grunted in distaste. "For some reason he's just on a vendetta to do this alone. I don't know why he's forcing himself into this lone-wolf mindset."

"So what are we going to do, Ash?" Joker asked, glancing back towards his friend.

Before she was able to respond, another person joined them in the cockpit.

"If I might interject my opinion," said a woozy Church, gripping his gut in pain. "We do what all of you really want to do. Go back in and help the man."

Joker and Ashley exchanged glances, silently wondering how long Church had been listening.

"Look, I know me and my people are still the outsiders here," Church continued, "But all of you have some insane urge to follow the Commander to hell and back. Sometimes, you just have to keep following, even when it looks like he's ready to quit."

Looking crossed, Ashley said, "It is only logical." She looked over to Joker. "There wouldn't be a Shepard, if it weren't for us, all of us."

Smiling, Joker turned back to face his console, pushing the engines into a forward thrust.

"I couldn't agree with you more," he said with a grin spreading wide across his face.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>Right, almost done with the first arch of story! And after only two years, that must be something XD. I appreciate your patience on this story, to those of you who actually follow it.

I do have a bit of news to drop. I'm going to continue with my original plan on adding polls for readers to reflect their decisions for the major choices in the Mass Effect game. And for the next poll, I want you guys to say **\*\*who Shepard romanced during the adventures of ME2.\*\*** This won't be the final romance, but it will add a bit of drama (Which all of you must love) to the sub plot I will expand upon later.

As of now, there are only a few choices which have been decided.

1) Is Shepard's final romance- Liara

2) Who Shepard romanced in ME1- Ashley (Sorry that was done by me, wanted to add my own bit of play through in here)

3) Shepard will cure the genophage, when the time comes. I do apologize for not putting a poll for this one, but I thought that no one (And I mean no one) wanted to see Wrex die. And I kind of refuse to write out that scene. Sorry ya bastards, I love that old Krogan, and for good reason.

And that's it. More polls will come your way, make sure to go and check out my profile, where the poll will be posted, and vote.

As always, thank you for reading and I hope you leave your thoughts in the reviews =D

20. I know what the ladies like

**\*\*Ch 20\*\***

**\*\*I know what the ladies like\*\***

**\*\*Surface of Halo\*\***

**\*\*2 moths before Reaper invasion\*\***

Walking out into the cool morning air, Shepard stretched his arms loose, limbering himself up for the fight ahead. He had somehow managed to find sleep during the night, only awaking once to the sound of a Phantom passing over head. Despite that, he was able to rest remarkably well, considering he slumbered in full body armor.

Something else worried Shepard now, more than his unnerving ability to sleep on a hostile space station. After his fight in the Halo's control center, Sentinel drones had been sent to hunt him down. They were out hunting anything really, all trying to eliminate any alien presence. Hopefully, Shepard wouldn't become a victim just yet.

So now he faced three different factions, the Covenant that had followed him there, the Flood he had met there, and now ancient Forerunner machines. All of which were hell bent on finding him, not that this weighed too heavily on his mind.

Luckily for Shepard, one concern would be dealt with. Instead of having to walk several kilometers across the ring to find the Covenant frigate, EDI would be able to teleport him there instantly. At least he wouldn't be forced to jog.

Grabbing his pack from the ground, Shepard put his helmet back on and activated his radio.

"EDI," he said, "ready whenever you are. You sure you'll put me just out side the landing zone?"

"This is not a perfect device, Shepard. And I am still trying to fight past the Monitor's security codes. But you should be fine, so long as you don't mind vaporization," \_EDI said calmly.

Unmoved, Shepard waited there in silence.

"That was a joke," \_she clarified.

"Let's just..."

Before he was able to finish his sentence, Shepard was encompassed in the glowing yellow lights again. The scenery before him vanished instantly, only to be replaced with the familiar blinding white. A second later, and the white was gone, bringing about another familiar view to Shepard.

He stood now on a cliff's edge, over looking the Covenant vessel still hovering over the beach below. Since the last time he was there, the Covenant had beefed up their security, Shepard could see several more fortifications than before. However, now they were being besieged by something decidedly less Human.

"Covenant forces are being over run by the Flood. They've already taken over most of the ship, and the Covenant are preparing another force to retake it," \_EDI said, informing Shepard of the situation before him.

From his vantage point, Shepard could see the smaller Grunts running away in fear as the massive Flood forms, which seemed built for combat, tackle them to the ground, ripping out their organs by hand.

"EDI, teleport me down there. Then move those things somewhere else," Shepard ordered, formulating a plan.

"I'll be able to teleport the flood forms outside the ship, but I can not reach the ones in the frigate. You will have to remove them by force." As EDI spoke, another familiar light surrounded Shepard, bringing him down to the beach head. As soon as he had materialized, the combat forms took notice of him, and immediately started to sprint after him.

Shepard stood, unflinching as he watched the monstrous creatures rapid approach. A moment later, and they were all bathed within a yellow light, only to vanish an instant later. Now Shepard stood alone, the only living left standing on the beach. Looking around, he found himself the gravity pad, still anchoring the frigate to the ring's surface.

Stepping onto the large pad, Shepard was immediately greeted with the feeling of weightlessness, before slowly floating up towards the ship. Pulling out his Mattock, he readied himself for any possible threat above.

To his surprise, once Shepard had floated into the hanger bay, he wasn't immediately attacked. Even upon closer inspection, he found no perceivable threat. What he did find, where pieces of Flood infested carcasses, all splattered apart by some kind of brute force. He also took note of the lack of any dead aliens on the floor, where only multicolored blood stains could be found.

Activating his omni-tool, Shepard looked over the floor plan of the ship EDI had sent him. Looking to his right, he headed down the open hallway, that would lead straight to the engine room. Its door was partially open, with one side of the sliding wall malfunctioning and sliding to and fro. As he exited the brightly lit hanger bay, his surroundings grew incredibly dark. Somehow, the lights that should have illuminated his path were either completely off, or flickering between the light and dark.

"Just one more thing to worry about," he grunted aloud.

So far, he had yet to run into any problem, he figured this was because both the Flood and the Covenant would be fighting for control of the frigate's bridge. The ship was massive, larger than even an Alliance dreadnought. It wouldn't surprise Shepard, if he managed to reach the engine room without so much as a fight. Though he wasn't sure what his next course of action would be.

Now his body seemed to be running on auto-pilot, only his legs and arms seemed to act as he traversed down the barren passageway. Nothing seemed intent on stopping him, if it were not for the occasional moans and heavy footsteps, whose origins Shepard could not determine, Shepard would have thought himself alone. And it was not long before he reached his destination, only after following the curving hallway to its end point.

Looking to his wrist again, Shepard activated his omni-tool before contacting EDI, "Alright, I'm at the engine room, what's the plan?"

\_"You need to set the FTL engine to overload, and make sure to disconnect the safety program."\_

Grumbling, Shepard walked over to the terminal. "If I give set up a link, could you do all that?" he asked with a sigh.

\_"Of course Shepard. One moment," \_EDI said, as the AI delved itself into yet another alien computer network. \_"Shepard, I'm detecting multiple hostiles incoming. It will take me a moment to fight through the Covenant computer systems, you need to find cover and stay close to this terminal."\_

Glancing back to the door, Shepard spotted two combat Flood burst through. Without even thinking, he pulled his rifle's trigger, and jumped into the cover of a near by crate. As he ducked behind cover, several more Flood started pouring into the room, all intent on killing Shepard and stopping their demise.

"EDI," Shepard shouted, trying to stop the massive amount of enemies flooding in, "How long do you need? I only have so much ammo."

\_"Almost done, but I need to set a timer delay in order for you..."\_

Her voice was drowned out by the sound of Shepard's frag going off, causing the small infection blobs to burst like fire crackers.

"Don't bother," he said. "Once you finish, just have it blow. We can't risk these things deactivating the drive."

\_"Shepard, there's no chance you would survive," \_EDI responded, sounding almost sad at the order she'd been given.

Pulling out his Eagle, Shepard unloaded a clip into a large zombie charging him. The walk forced his gun up, spewing bullets in a line straight from the creatures gut up into its skull, covering Shepard in a cloud of goop.

Spitting to clear his mouth of the vile matter, which somehow managed to enter through his helmet's mouth piece, Shepard shouted into his radio again. "Just do it!"

Just then, a dozen more Flood pushed through the opening, flooding into Shepard's position. Without warning, the container he had taken cover behind, was flipped aside as a massive green monster stood before him. It reached up its massive mound of an arm, and knocked Shepard aside like a rag doll. He hit the far wall head first, almost shattering his helmet. Falling to the floor, Shepard struggled to stand up, it felt as if his ribs had been crushed. With his vision clouded by the helmet's cracked visor, Shepard was barely able to see the monster striding over to him.

"Come on you ugly son of a..." Shepard grunted, pulling his pistol, which he somehow managed to keep hold of, to aim at the creature. Unfortunately, with the its clip depleted, Shepard was left helpless as it progressed ever so slowly to him.

Suddenly, the sound of another explosion reached Shepard's ears. At



first, he thought EDI had been successful, that he might finally saved the galaxy for his final time. He braced himself, hoping desperately that it would be over in one instantaneous moment. To his surprise, the explosion came from the engine room's entrance, and caused the few combat Flood remaining to fly across the room. Almost immediately after that, and the massive form striding over to him fell, shot clear through by a shot gun blast.

As the monster dropped to the ground, the image of James, decked out in his full combat gear, came into view. "Loco," he said with a chuckle.

Shepard was barely able to see him, his vision still blocked by the broken helmet. He felt someone rush over to him, pulling him into a standing position and wrapping his arm around their shoulder.

"Sorry, Commander," came a feminine voice, "you can court martial me later."

"Ashley?" Shepard managed to stammer.

Someone else removed his helmet, shining a bright light into Shepard's eyes. Once the light was gone, Church's face came into focus.

"To be honest, sir," Church said, "this was partially my idea."

Blinking his eyes and mind clear, Shepard looked over his squadmates. All of them were in the room, Manny and Erin were busy covering the door, ensuring they weren't overrun again. Pulling his arm back to his side, Shepard looked to Ashley, waving his hand to tell her he'd be able to stand on his own.

"Let's just get out of here, I'll bring up charges in the morning," Shepard said, trying to use humor to cover over his pain. "Ashley, James, you two ensure the hallway stays clear, have those two follow," he ordered, pointing to Manny and Erin as he did so, "Church and I will be right behind you."

Nodding in acknowledgment, the four of them exited the engine room and started heading back towards the exit. Bending over, Church grabbed Shepard's Mattock, handing it back to the commander as he moved to the FTL drive.

"Are you alright, sir?" Church asked, still wary of the Commander's remaining strength.

Shepard looked from his omni-tool to the console before him, making sure EDI had managed to complete her task, which she was.

"Just one question for you, Lieutenant. Why did you and your squad come back?" Shepard asked, not looking away from his task.

Puzzled, Church thought for a moment before responding. "To be honest sir, I know you're not a lone wolf. No matter how hard you try to be, you're going to need someone to cover your six."

Shepard chuckled at that. "Which explains why Ashley came back, but

not you."

Church shrugged his shoulders, "Better than listening to Joker try to be funny."

"Fair enough. Now come on, the ship's ready to blow," he said to Church, before heading for the door. "EDI, how long is our time window?"

The silent pause after Shepard's question seemed almost unsettling, \_"I'm afraid I can only give you a 15 minutes, Shepard. Any longer and we risk the FTL system failing, preventing its explosion."

—

This caused the duo to quicken their pace, jogging down the hallway to catch up to their allies. They found Ashley and James waiting in the cargo bay, instead of focusing on any possible threats, they were arguing amongst themselves.

"Where's Manny and Erin?" Church asked, scanning around the room for the two left in his charge.

Giving off an almost ashamed look, James answered Church. "We found Sam's signal. It shows he's alive and on the bridge, but..."

Church's mouth practically dropped, prevented only by the lining of his helmet.

"Ashley and I thought it might be some kind of trap. They just rushed off ahead."

Angered, Shepard cut in, "We don't have time for this! Church, can you go..." he didn't have to finish. Sprinting at full speed, Church headed down the opposite hallway, almost tripping over discarded limbs in his way, leaving behind the other three in the process.

It didn't take him long to reach the bridge. Erin, in either rage or love, had been through the same passage way, slaughtering everything she possibly could. There were almost a hundred flood corpses, littering the hall he traversed, and the body count only seemed to increase as Church continued. He could only imagine how she might be feeling. One thing was for sure, Manny was being dragged along with her, probably scared shit-less.

Finally, he reached the bridge, which seemed oddly devoid of any threat. Noticing his squad just ahead, Church slowed his pace to a jog in order to catch up. They were standing there, on the platform like level that looked over the consoles down below. Whatever their strategy was, the Covenant had a unique bridge design.

"Hey, what the hell happened?" Church questioned, "Where's..."

Entering the room, he discovered why they both simply stood there. In the corner of the bridge, connected to the walls and floor by massive web like structures, was an entire bio mass of green puss-like material. The entire thing seemed like some sort of sadistic shrine, covered in the bones and flesh of the different Covenant species. However, it was the body in the center that attracted the eyes of

Church and his squad.

Surrounded by the fleshy mass of puss and bodies, was a single human body, protruding from the blob as a grotesque sight. Though the body was mostly dissolved and decayed, the face was still clearly visible, covered in a thin layer of the green goo. Despite the obvious distortion, it was very visible the face belonged to Sam.

"He's still alive," Manny muttered, "I don't know how, but his mind's still conscious."

In silence, Church walked closer to the blob, Manny and Erin kept their eyes strained on it, waiting motionless. Lowering his rifle to the side of his leg, he pulled out the pistol, strapped to his hip, with his free hand. There was no way Sam would be getting off the ring, it seemed impossible to Church that he was even alive, let alone conscious. Stepping closer, it seemed as if Sam's eyes moved with him, following Church as he walked closer. Despite all the slime and puss covering him, it seemed as though Sam was mouthing something, something Church struggled to decipher.

Though it only took a few steps, each one seemed like its own hurdle towards an undesirable destination. He knew what needed to be done, knew the desperate look in Sam's eyes only translated into one desperate plea for help. Once Church had finally reached the mass that was his squadmate, and his friend, he leveled the pistol to Sam's head.

Closing his eyes, so as to avoid the sight before him, Church's arm seemed unable to pull the trigger. Every nerve in his body told him to stop, to drag Sam out and carry him home. The idea went away with the sound of a gun shot.

\* \* \*

><p>Still waiting for the other's return, Shepard sat on the floor, propped up against a container for support. He wouldn't be able to fight, simply shooting would hurt him more than he'd be able to bear. Luckily for him, they seemed to be safe for the moment, at least until the frigate's FTL drive finished her explosive countdown. They were sitting on a bomb, one that would literally send their corpses to another dimension.<p>

When he wasn't glancing towards James and Ashley, who were both exchanging nervous glances as they kept their weapons trained down the hall, he was looking at the countdown on his omni-tool. Only ten minutes remained, Shepard was growing tired of waiting.

A minute more, and footsteps were headed their way. Ashley readied herself, half expecting more flood to appear. She gave a sigh of relief as Church and his squad appeared, jogging down the hallway back to the cargo bay. Once they had regrouped, Shepard pushed himself into a standing position.

"What happened?" James asked, moving over to assist Shepard. "Did you guys find Sam. We just saw his reading go out."

None of them responded, Manny just bowed his head sheepishly as Church moved straight for the exit. Only Erin gave him any kind of closure, giving him a cold stern look of anger. As Shepard stood, he

looked to James, mouthing for him to forget about it for the time being.

Reaching the gravity lift down, Shepard looked to Ashley. "We've got eight minutes," he said, "Is the shuttle there and waiting?"

Shaking her head, Ashley responded, "Had to take the Mako. Covenant have been sending too many air patrols."

"Then there's no time to waste," Shepard grunted, as the entire group floated safely down to the ground below. Without wasting any time, the group immediately piled into the vehicle, pushing themselves close in the cramped seats of the tank. Pushing himself to the front, Shepard took the wheel, while Ashley sat in the turret seat next to him. "Six minutes left, get Joker on the comm," Shepard said, pushing the throttle of the Mako to the max level.

"Hold up a minute," the voice came from the back. James appeared between Ashley and Shepard, reaching his arm across the dash to a holographic button. "If we're running against the clock, we need something to speed it along." Loud blaring music blasted through the internal speakers of the Mako, causing the seats to vibrate.

Just then, Joker came over Shepard's radio.

\_"Commander? I take it you need a lift home?"\_

Before he was able to respond, the Mako shook violently. This tremor wasn't caused by the music, but from something outside of the vehicle. Apparently, the Covenant weren't going to let them escape even now. Large pink vehicles were chasing them, Revenants by what the Alliance had classed them. They fired a swift moving plasma mortar, similar to what the Wraith's would fire.

"Just give me your flight plan, Joker. We don't have time to waste."

On queue, the windshield was illuminated with a holographic display, pointing Shepard in the appropriate direction.

\_"I've got a couple fighters on me, we're gonna have to do a Crazy Ivan to get out of this one."\_

Unable to respond, Shepard merely grunted as a plasma shell landed almost in front of them, creating a small crater as it impacted the ground. By now, the music was picking up pace, almost drowning out the noise of the Revenants, and the Ashley's return fire. It seemed to quicken Shepard's pace, pushing the adrenalin through him quicker. A turn left, and the music's beat followed. Jumping over a rock, and the response was the same.

Another explosion rocked Shepard out of his trance, this one felt stronger than the rest. Covenant fighters flew past them over head, coming into the view range of the Mako's windshield. They were followed by the Normandy, which in turn was being tailed by two more fighters. The squad watched anxiously as the ship moved far ahead of them, creating a vast distance between the Mako and the frigate.

With a sudden burst of energy, the port side engines of the Normandy

\_powered down, as micro thrusters pushed the ship left. This, coupled with the power of the starboard engine, and the entire ship made a surprisingly quick turn around. Now, with the hanger bay doors open, Joker flew the ship low, skimming the sides of the engines along the ground.

Waiting for the frigate to be in the exact right position, Shepard activated the Mako's jump jets, landing right inside of the familiar bay. Unable to fully stop, the Mako skid along the floor, only prevented from continuing by the Kodiak still held firmly in place. The two vehicles collided, sending a shower of sparks across the floor as the rear of the Mako continued moving due to its momentum. Finally the tank settled into place, giving Shepard and company a clear view of the surface below, as the \_Normandy \_pulled away from the Halo's gravity, and the bay door closed.

"Only a minute left," James muttered, right as the music died down into silence. Unflinching, Shepard braced himself into the Mako's seat, gripping the bottom of the chair until his gloves left a permanent indentation into the cheap cushion.

\_"Hang on!" \_Joker's voice shouted of the ship's speakers, warning everyone of the impending trouble. To her credit, the \_Normandy \_flew with astounding speed, faster than she ever had before.

Seconds passed, the Covenant frigate vaporized instantly, gone into a black dimensional void. A second later, and the ring began its own destruction, falling apart piece by piece. Another second, and the shock wave from the plat reached the \_Normandy\_ right as she made the jump to FTL.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>By the gods he's done it. Caboose has FINALLY finished the first section of this story, for better or worse XD. As always, your reviews are most welcome and appreciated. Story is picking up a bit of a following, more or less, and I thank those of you who have helped shape its progress.

Bit of news, the poll for Shep's ME 2 romance will go down at the next chapter's posting. So pleas vote on that, if you'd like to alter the story at all

## 21. The Little Things

\*\*Ch 21\*\*

\*\*The Little Things\*\*

\*\*Normandy\*\*

\*\*One week before Reaper invasion\*\*

Sitting in the \_Normandy's \_observation post, Shepard looked out the window as an ocean of light enveloped his field of view. During FTL trips, the light show was always fantastic, but almost always lost its appeal to those too accustomed with it. Now, Shepard just wanted to enjoy every little piece of pleasure he could. \_><em>

Most the crew were asleep, seeing as their long trip through space didn't allow for much else. Even Joker, who always managed to fabricate an excuse to remain in the cockpit, was resting soundly in the crew quarters. This left the ship eerily quiet, more so than she ever was before. The alien Huragok, who they had commandeered from the Covenant, proved to be a near necessity for the ship. He managed to not only repair the damaged components, but make them better.

A ring came from Shepard's arm, immediately followed by him activating his omni-tool. Adam's face materialized on the screen, he seemed to be enjoying himself far too much.

"Shepard, great news. I've done a diagnostic test. Your little alien friend, he's improved our drive core capacities by over 400%. Now we only have to discharge every year, rather than every other day. That's just on top of everything else, FTL already has a 25% increase in efficiency, and he just started work on the drive core. It's like someone gifted this thing a silicon thumb." Adams went over the news with glee, excited to see the new functions of his life's work.

"And do we have long range communications back up?" Shepard asked, happy to see things were finally turning the way they needed.

Rubbing his chin, Adam's responded, "Yes, but we're not picking up any return response. Best case scenario is, there's something wrong on our end. Quantum entanglement isn't the most stable form of communication. We could just have some piece of metal jammed in our antenna, the problem's not in the interior. But we can't check out any damage while in FTL."

"What's the worse case scenario?"

"You know the answer to that better than anyone, Shepard."

"Just keep me informed, Adams," Shepard said, turning off his omni-tool with a sigh. There was nothing worse than not knowing if the home you were returning to even existed anymore, let alone the people you left behind.

His thoughts were interrupted by the door opening, a familiar sounding foot step came from behind him. He knew it was Ashley coming to see him, even without having to turn around. Stepping around the couch, she moved to sit next to him, careful to keep her distance from the man.

"Shepard," she said, sounding a bit mindful of her words.

Keeping his view focused on the window, Shepard answered, "Yes, Lieutenant."

"I just wanted to make sure you were alright," Ashley said, crossing her legs and turning to view outside as well. "We haven't had a chance to talk since we left system."

"No, we haven't had a chance to talk in a while." He turned to her now, crossing his arms and leaning back in the seat. "So go ahead and talk."

Leaning over her knees, Ashley placed her elbows on her legs, rubbing her hands together nervously. 'Shit,' she thought, 'I feel like Tali doing this.'

"I wanted to know where we stand, me and you that is," she stuttered out, barely able to look him in the eye.

"You seemed pretty clear on that, back on Horizon," Shepard responded coldly.

Ashley sighed, "That was before. With the whole Cerberus thing, and you being dead, I didn't know what to think. I was just so angry and confused."

Standing up, Shepard chuckled before he responded. "Ash, let's worry on getting our asses home. I'm not..."

Unable to listen, Ashley interrupted Shepard before he was able to finish his statement.

"Damn it, Shepard," she cursed, jumping up to the couch with her fist clenched beside herself. "You're not going to just leave at that! I need an answer." She pointed to him grudgingly, poking his chest hard with her finger to drive home the anger behind her voice. "Do you still love me?"

Shepard looked at her in a mixture of shock and fear, unprepared for the sudden switch of calm to anger.

"Ash," he sighed, "I can't, not after you abandoned me. Your hatred and anger proved how little I actually meant to you then." She seemed to soften at his words, eyes growing watery as she tried to hold back emotions she hadn't felt in years.

"I'm sorry, Shepard," she said, quickly turning around to avoid having to look him in the eye. Without another word, she started walking away from him, desperately trying to regain control of her demeanor.

In a vain attempt to council her, Shepard called out, "Wait, Ashley, I didn't mean to..." He gave up trying to call out to her, she had traveled far out of ear shot. Grumbling, Shepard turned back towards the view outside, plopping back down on the couch in frustration. He pleaded for one thing to go right just one time.

He stayed like that for a while, sitting there motionless, observing the blue glow of the outside space as the ship traveled through FTL. It was some type of hypnotic hue, rocking him out of the pain caused by living. It wasn't much, but it brought him some kind of tranquility, reminding him of a conversation he had long ago with Liara.

"Did I ever tell you about the sunsets on Thessia?" Liara had asked him, months ago now, during her visit back after they had saved her friend Feron. "There's so much eezo in the air, that the light does a unique thing and turns a brilliant shade of blue, just before it vanishes over the horizon."

Shepard remembered chuckling over her description of the Thessian sunset, the way she moved her whole body to describe it, infused with

the confidence gifted by several glasses of wine. It wasn't much of a memory, but sometimes only the little things kept him going. Be it Liara's drunken sprawls, or Garrus avoiding conversations by saying he needed to calibrate something.\_  
><em>

A noise interrupted Shepard's thoughts, bringing him back to the grim reality.

"Commander," came an all too familiar voice. "You busy at the moment?" Joker's body hobbled into view, greeting Shepard with an unusually friendly smile.

"What is it, Joker?"

Moving his arm around, Joker produced a glass bottle to present Shepard with. "Thought you could use a little celebration drink. You know, after destroying an alien super weapon and wiping out most of another alien fleet."

Without much hesitation, Shepard reached out to grab the bottle, admiring the thought of sharing a drink with the pilot. "Take a seat, Joker," he said, pointing to the cushion nest to him.

Dropping onto the couch, Joker spread himself across the sofa, placing his arms on the back of the couch. "Ouch," he blurted as he fell, "Think I broke my pelvis doing that."

Shepard allowed himself a small snicker. "Can never tell if you're being literal whenever you say you break things. You're too damn fragile, Joker. Should probably just put you surrounded in bubble-wrap."

"Ha-ha-ha," Joker laughed sarcastically, "Make fun of the crippled." He pointed towards the still unopened bottle in Shepard's hands. "Now are you going to open that or what? I'd like a drink too ya know."

"Why didn't you grab a couple of glasses?"

"I'm crippled, remember?" Joker scoffed, "Just be happy I remembered your favorite."

Opening the bottle, Shepard leaned his head back and let the nectar drip down his throat, before handing it over to Joker who followed in his example. They drank in silence, neither one having anything pressing to divulge to the other, but as the drinking continued, their silence gave way to speech.

"I overheard your little spat with Ash," Joker said, handing the glass bottle back to Shepard. By now, their drink was running dry, down to the last few swigs of liquid.

"How did you overhear us?" Shepard questioned.

Grabbing the bottle back from Shepard, Joker took one last sip before abandoning the idea entirely. "It was EDI's fault really, she decided to leave the PA system on. Sorry about her I guess."

Leaning down in his seat, Shepard placed his hands over his stomach,



rejoicing in the warm feeling of drink in his stomach. Closing his eyes, he responded, "Nothing to be sorry for. Just didn't work out is all."

"You don't suppose I might be her type do you? Since she is single after all," Joker said mockingly.

"You go try that Joker," responded Shepard, through the laughter and choking caused by the image of both Joker and Ashley together. "See how well it works out."

"Yeah she'd probably kick my ass out the air lock for just starrng at hers."

The duo laughed for at this, soaking in their enjoyment, causing Shepard to slide off of the couch onto the floor. This only increased their obnoxious behavior. Eventually they calmed themselves, switching back into a comfortable silence. Now they both stared into the blue outside the window, mesmerized by the ever changing patterns of the light.

"Shepard," Joker said, sounding as if sleep would soon overtake him. Turning his head around, Shepard found the pilot moving his legs up onto the couch, placing his head on the other end of it. He was positioning himself to fall asleep. "I think we might have a drinking problem."

With a renewed smile, Shepard turned back towards the window. "You might have a problem. I personally see alcohol as my problem solver," he said, leaning his head back on the couch, arching his neck as he did so. He knew falling asleep like so would give him a stiff neck in the morning, but he was past the point of caring.

Joker gave a soft smile. "Jackass," he muttered, before falling into a deep sleep.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Alliance Space: Earth<strong>

Standing aboard the \_Normandy's \_cockpit, Shepard watched as Joker maneuvered the vessel down to the awaiting planet. As the ship slowed through its process of reentry, Shepard braced himself in the seat. A moment later, and the planet's familiar blue skies were above them, promoting a resounding cheer from the exhausted crew. A few minutes later, and they were cleared to land in the Vancouver spaceport.

It wasn't long before the entire crew were rushing outside the air lock, into the awaiting arms of their family or friends. A congregation of reporters and cameras had gathered there, overshadowing the welcome home with cameras and questions. They were quickly pushed aside by the local security.

Stepping off of the air lock himself, with James following close behind, Shepard was immediately stopped by an Alliance marine.

"Sorry sir, but I've been ordered to take you straight to Admiral Anderson," he said, his hand pointing towards an elevator.

"Just a minute," Shepard uttered, turning around to talk to James. "I'm going to have one hell of a debriefing to give. Make sure everything's taken care of here."

James gave a salute before saying, "Yes sir, Commander." He watched as Shepard was escorted to the taxi, followed by numerous reporters all fighting to gain some kind of interview with the famous Human. Turning back to the ship, James pushed through the now shrinking crowd, headed towards his locker on the crew deck.

As he entered the ship, he passed by Manny and Erin, both eager to simply step outside into the fresh Earth air.

"James," Manny said surprised, while Erin persistently pulled his arm out the airlock door, "Church needed to talk to the Commander, he's in the mess." Unable to finish, Manny was finally pushed outside, fighting against Erin the entire time to get his message across.

Shrugging, James continued on to the crew deck, making sure to give a silent thanks that the alien engineer had managed to speed up the \_Normandy's \_elevator considerably. Stepping off the platform, James noticed Church standing awkwardly alone on the deck.

"Hey boss," James said, walking over to tap the marine on his shoulder, "Sorry but you missed Shepard, he was just dragged away by some MPs."

Church grimaced, grumbling that he hadn't thought to grab the Commander's attention sooner. "Was just going to give my thanks and good byes. Our squad's been reassigned. Looks like we won't be sticking around after all."

With a slight frown on his face, James reached out his hand towards Church. "Well, it was fun while it lasted," he said, "Where are you headed now?"

"London," Church answered, taking James's hand and shaking it. "And thanks, I'm sure we'll see each other again."

"Of course," James chuckled, "Crazy loves company."

The pair walked towards the elevator, leaving the ship that had served as their home for months now.

"Why London?" James asked, breaking the brief moment of silence as they rode to the second deck. "Are you shipping out from there or something?"

Bowing his head, Church's face took a look of solemnness. "Sam and I were stationed there at one time. There was this bar just outside the city. It's where we used to take the squad whenever we returned home."

"I understand that," James said.

\* \* \*

><p>Arriving on top of an Alliance building, Shepard was greeted with another entourage of soldiers, all of whom saluted him as he stepped

out of the taxi. They seemed to give him such high praise, as if he were a king among the commoners. It unsettled the Commander slightly.<p>

"Commander," a familiar voice called him. Coming through the small parade of saluting grunts was an officer who brought with him just as much respect as Shepard.

"Anderson," he said with a smile. "Damn good to see you, but what's with the welcoming committee?"

Stopping next to him, Anderson gently guided Shepard away from the roof's landing platform. "You've been gone for months, Shepard. We've all been eagerly awaiting your return."

They entered an awaiting elevator, Anderson waived the two MPs following him off so that he and Shepard were alone, before pushing the holographic button for them to descend farther into the building.

"First thing's first, how are you doing, son?" Anderson asked, his voice filled with concern. He turned to look at him, trying to gain a reading on his attitude. Shepard diverted his gaze away from the Admiral's direct line of sight.

"I'm fine," he responded.

"Your crew's reports didn't sound 'fine.' Joker seems to think you might be a tad suicidal. And Lt. Williams expressed concerns for your mental well being."

"They're over exaggerating the situation," Shepard sad, continuing hie efforts to avoid eye contact.

Sliding back against the wall, Anderson diverted his gaze straight ahead and crossed his arms. "I hope so, for your sake as well as ours. You and the \_Normandy \_crew are Humanity's best hope of survival."

"Why do you say that?"

"Things aren't going so well on our end. This Covenant has advanced technology, the likes of which we've never seen. Hackett hasn't tried to engage them in any large scale fleet battles, he's trying to test the waters before we devote any resources into a full scale war. The Salarians have proven invaluable at providing information about them."

"How bad is it?"

"We've only lost a few small colonies in the Skyllian Verge, Harvest and two others. Luckily we were able to evacuate the later two, they were relatively small colonies."

"Small colonies? What has the Covenant been doing since we left?"

Shifting his feet, Anderson continued, "So far everything we know is through observation. The last two invasions played out the same way. A small alien vessel is discovered entering the system from somewhere

else besides the mass relay. After all attempts to communicate it have failed, a small fleet arrives through the same means. The colonies were too small to risk a fleet at all, so the population is evacuated as the fleet moves to burn every living thing on the planet. We've sent a couple of scout vessels back, the Covenant is under the opinion that everything we touch needs to be sanitized with fire."

"How have they only taken three systems so far?" Shepard asked, slightly suspended in disbelief.

"That's where it gets odd. From what the Salarians have gathered, the Covenant think we built the relays. And apparently they have no idea how they even work. An intercepted communication implied they never bothered to even try learning. They simply blew the thing up with the fire power of half their fleet. They were met with a surprise once it destroyed half the system. They've decided to try finding our planets the old fashioned way. Chances are command will try to retake the systems, after they're able to bolster the fleet. The possibility of invasion has caused Parliament to institute a draft, and devote more resources towards bolstering our fleets. You might not like it Shepard, but this Covenant is doing more to prep us for the Reapers than we ever could.

Their elevator stopped suddenly, revealing a hallway beyond the doors.

"So what about you, Shepard?" Anderson asked as he walked into the hallway, followed quickly by the Commander. "What did you find?"

"That's a long story sir, but I have a feeling it might be the key to solving everything."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN <strong>Right well we're keeping the ball rolling here.

Romance option is still open, mainly because I have a tie between two characters. So I need you guys to go and vote. The poll will close by the next chapter posting, and a new poll will come up. If there's still a tie, I get to pick Shepard's romance option from ME2.

As always, let me know what you think and feel free to review. Thank you for reading =)

## 22. Sitting in a Bunker

**\*\*Ch 22\*\***

**\*\*Sitting in a Bunker\*\***

**\*\*Alliance Headquarters: Vancouver\*\***

**\*\*Reaper Invasion\*\***

Looking down from far above a small park, Shepard watched as a small boy played with his toys among the foliage. It was somewhat calming

to watch something so normal and simple, far from the war and politics he'd been forced to deal with the past few days. Since his return, Shepard had been debriefed by seemingly every politician, officer, and committee the Alliance had at its disposal. Half of them refused to even believe what they were hearing. Luckily Shepard possessed an entire crew willing to vouch for the insanity they had all seen, something he desperately wished would have happened years ago during his fight with Saren.

The bureaucracy of war was starting to wear thin on his mind.

A door behind him opened, dragging Shepard's mind back into the now. Anderson greeted him at the door, his normally calm demeanor seeming to break slightly.

"Anderson, everything alright?" Shepard asked, growing ever so uneasy by the Admiral's grave expression.

Silently, Anderson beckoned for the Commander to follow him. The pair turned into the hallway, abuzz with dozens of men and women running about.

"Not in the slightest," Anderson finally answered, his tone matching the dark expression he wore. "We've gotten reports from the Skyllian Verge, something big is headed straight for Sol, for Earth."

"Is it the Covenant? Finally regrouped and ready for a new offensive?"

Shaking his head, Anderson continued, narrowly avoiding an officer too preoccupied with the tablet in his hand to bother acknowledging the duo. "That's what Hackett was thinking, but this doesn't fit any of their previous attacks. And there's another thing that doesn't fit right. The Batarians have stopped broadcasting their propaganda, and there's been no detectable communication from any Hegemony official at all, they've gone almost completely dark."

Shepard stopped suddenly, finally realizing the gravity of their situation.

"Reapers?" Shepard said, his question coming out as more of a declaration than an actual inquisitive response.

Anderson stopped with him, turning to face the Commander head on. "The Committee was hoping you might now."

"Well what else could it be?" His voice rose in volume, almost angered by the thought of meeting with more politicians while war brewed.

Turning on his heels, Anderson continued pushing through the hall. "We don't for sure not yet. They're just scared Shepard, we all are. Can you blame them after all the shit you've seen?"

Responding with silence, Shepard followed close behind the Admiral as he passed through a guarded check point leading straight to one last door. After having his identity confirmed, the two guards allowed the pair to proceed into the room. It was large in size, obviously meant to greet and impress dignitaries. Three Alliance officers sat at a large table in front of a massive window that overlooked the city of

Vancouver. Their stature would have been impressive, were it not for the atmosphere of worry that befell everyone in the room.

'This is going to be pointless,' Shepard thought to himself as he walked to closer to the now ominous window.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>London<strong>

Along a fairly desolate road in the English country side sat a bar, run down and nearly isolated save for three individuals who sat now at the bar finishing their last bottle of beer. The bartender had attempted to make idle chitchat with the three, but was quickly brushed aside as they all ordered. Aside from their initial order of drinks Church, Manny, and Erin ignored any other attempts to socialize.

"So this was Sam's favorite bar," Erin muttered, breaking the near dead silence. "Could be worse?"

Church was the first to respond, "We've come here after every mission. And gave a drink to those who couldn't. I forget, this is your first time here isn't it?"

It was Manny who answered his question. "Lucky for us, once Erin arrived our death rate dropped significantly," he said with a chuckle. "Harvest was the first time in a long time we lost anyone."

"So here's to all of them," Erin said, holding her bottle high above her head in a symbolic gesture. "To Johnson, Misty, Cassandra, Varrick, Morrigan,..." Her voice rang high as she listed off the names of their dead squad-mates, but she struggled to say the last name. The only sound she was able to produce, was a mere whimper holding back the large lump in her throat. She was close to tears, not that her ice cold glare gave any of it away to Church and Manny.

"And to Sam," Church said, finishing off the deceases' roster. He held his drink aloft, clanking it silently with Erin's. Manny's bottle joined theirs, all three silently clinking together. They finished their drinks in silence, savoring the peace they earned over the past months of violence and war. Not that the peace would last long, none of them were deceived in that fact. Merely, they wished to embrace what little quiet was presented to them.

A deep Scottish accent broke through the bar. "You know, it's not really any of my business," it was the bartender that interrupted their silence, "but wherever those friends of yours are now, they'll be sure as hell looking out for ya. I had myself some friends like that once, course that was ages ago, before that whole clown fiasco." His thoughts seemed to be escaping him, the soldiers looked on in silence, not knowing what else to do. "I digress. Point is this, you had friends, soldiers no less. Everybody dies, you lot ought to know that better than anyone. No sense bellyaching over something you got no control over, past is past. Worry more about the future and remember the dead fondly, not often."

Once he was finished with his ramblings, the bartender returned to

his work wiping off unused tables in the back. The squad left their bottles at the bar, paid for their drinks, and left without another word spoken between them. Returned now to the relative safety of the outside world, they piled into Church's skycar, with Erin driving.

"You remembered the armor and weapons, right Manny?" Church asked, not wanting to make a detour on their way to the Alliance base. Manny answered in the positive, and the car lifted into the sky, following a relatively unused road back to London.

Again, silence plagued them, none knowing exactly the right words for their circumstance. Leaving them to only wallow in their self doubt as they flew down the highway.

"I think maybe that bartender might have been drunk," Manny said, almost out of sheer desperation to bring them all out of their own minds.

Erin chuckled, "Maybe? You must be joking right? I'm surprised they're able to stay in business with the amount of beer he must be drinking during his shift. Bastard was down right loony."

They all laughed at this, easing them into a more relaxed state of mind.

Manny continued, "He might of been loony..."

"And drunk," Church interrupted.

"...and drunk," Manny said, continuing his previous sentence. "But that thing he said kind of makes sense if you think about it."

"What about? The clown fiasco?" Erin asked mockingly.

"No, that we need to remember the dead fondly, just not too often."

And with that, silence enveloped them all again as the London skyline started to appear in the distance.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Vancouver Space Dock: Normandy<strong>

Sitting in his chair in the cockpit, Joker looked over the data pad before him. Ever since they had landed back on Earth, the Alliance had been busy refitting and restocking the ship, while also looking over anything the alien engineer touched. Which was practically everything. Unwilling to leave both the ship and EDI alone, Joker insisted that he remain to oversee the Alliance techs. Traynor was only too happy to have his help.

"And that takes care of our fuel supply, as well as repairs for any damages our discharges might have received during the journey." Traynor stood behind Joker's chair, listing off everything of importance that she felt needed to be said. "Oh and they've given us a new paint job to cover up all those plasma burns. Should make her a bit prettier to look at."

"She was already pretty to look at," Joker said, almost snapping at the Specialist's remark.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to strike a nerve."

Joker pinched the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes shut as he did so. "No it's fine," he said apologetically, "I've just been going on coffee and paper work this past week." He leaned back in his chair, turning around to fully face Traynor. "Cortez get anything done in the hanger?"

"Yes," Traynor said, perking up a bit more than usual. "We're getting to keep the Hammerhead, and we're getting the Kodiaks replaced."

"Great, new toys for him to crash. What did the Alliance say about our Huragok? Do we get to keep ol' tenta-squishy or is he getting taken by 'top men.'" He said the last part with his fingers in the air, coupled with a sarcastic menacing voice.

She sighed, giving off a defeated look. "Though I tried to convince them otherwise, they've decided to keep Wilds. Apparently their trying to make more engineers like him."

"Which means we just gave Humanity its first slave race," Joker said with a sigh. "Alright what else do we got?"

Before the Specialist could respond, a warning light began flashing on the cockpit's controls. It grabbed Joker's attention, who turned back around in his seat.

"EDI, are you still connected to the Alliance's strategic channel?" Joker asked, opening up a new window on the control's monitors. The screen starting showing live feeds and news streaming in for the top military officers to see.

"I am," came the disembodied voice. "And you may want to prepare the ship for take off."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN:<strong> Okay, onto the good-good stuff.

Sorry about the relatively short chapter, but there wasn't much else for me to put in here. I didn't want to do a lot with the first sequence, seeing as its copy and pasted from the game. I find it difficult to write what I know already happened, and I assume most of you do too. So I took the liberty to see what some other characters might be doing at this exact point in time, right as the Reapers invade. In case you didn't figure it out already, this takes place directly before the events in the first chapter.

Update on the polls news. The ME2 romance has been chosen as Miranda Lawson, next question is pertaining to the Rachni Queen. So go and vote if you'd like to alter the world state of this story.

And as always, please leave your reviews telling me what you think of the story so far. It's always a pleasure hearing the readers feedback.

>Thanks for reading =><p>



## 23. Here Behind My Wall

**\*\*Ch 23\*\***

**\*\*Here Behind my Wall\*\***

**\*\*Forerunner Gas Mine\*\***

**\*\*9th Age of \*\*\*\*Reclamation  
><strong>**

Bracing himself against the wall of the Phantom drop ship, Thel 'Vadamee gripped his carbine tightly enjoying the brief respite before the battle ahead. The soldiers that surrounded him kept their distance, out of both fear and disgust. He would forever be forced to carry the burden of the seared mark upon his chest.

It had only been two months ago that the holy ring was destroyed, and he was given the blame for its destruction. The council had seen fit to brand him a heretic, despite his pleas that the minor prophet was to blame. For by the time he had dispatched the fool, the Flood was already released and the rings fate was sealed. He was physically branded with the seal of a traitor, publicly exposed to all of High Charity, and thrown into prison to await execution. However, the High Prophets found use in the fallen warrior.

Giving him another chance at redemption, to reclaim his lost honor, the Prophets gave him the choice to become Arbiter, a task that all but ensured he would die a glorious death in battle. The 'Vadamee accepted without hesitation.

"When we joined the Covenant, we took an oath," came the cries of Rtas 'Vadumee, the leader of their mission.

Every Sangheili responded in unison. "According to our station! All without exception!"

Thel let the voices of his fellows fade into black as he drifted into memory again. He could feel the distrust of the others around him, they viewed him as nothing more than a blasphemes instrument given one more use by the Prophets. And in truth, he felt no different. Thel held no illusion that every member of the Covenant wished for his death, himself included, but if there was any help he could offer in the ascension of the Great Journey, nothing would prevent him from regaining his honor.

However, the recent events of the Covenant had caused him to question his unflinching loyalty to the Covenant. The new Prophets seemed intent on finalizing their power before the Rings could be activated. Their attempt to eradicate the Humans caused even the most loyal to question why. Every other species found was given the option to join the Covenant in their holy quest, even if they had previously resisted their inevitable assimilation. And the actions of just a few Humans on the Halo had shown they were capable enemies, worth at least some consideration before being wiped from the galaxy.

Though the fate of one sapient species was not enough to openly question the Prophets commands. Yet there was still talk of a

shifting of power, the Jiralhanae, or Brutes as the appropriately called them, were gaining the favor of the Prophet of Truth. This was in due in part because of a growing insurrection movement led by Sangheili heretics.

After the destruction of the Holy Ring, a new faction quickly rose under the command of Sesa 'Refumee, a Sangheili deserter who served under Thel during his battle at Halo. Now he had been given the mission to end him and his band of heretics.

Rtas had finished his oath and, having inspected over the soldiers one last time, made a point to speak to the Thel.

"Arbiter," he said quietly.

'Yes, I am \_the \_Arbiter now,' Thel thought to himself, still uneasy about his new title.

Rtas continued. "That armor suits you," he spoke of the ancient almost ceremonial armor worn by Thel,"but it can not hide that mark," he said, referring to the branding upon the Arbiter's chest

"Nothing ever will," Thel responded, coldly.

"You are the Arbiter, the will of the Prophets. But these are my soldiers, their lives matter to me." Rtas swung his arm around the Phantom's carriage, giving emphasis to his words. Placing his arm back at his side, he took a step closer to the Arbiter, so that their eyes were locked. "Yours does not." As he spoke, his mandibles shook with a slight pain. Half of his mouth had been sliced off and damaged by some battle long ago, but it only seemed to give the warrior more respect from those around him.

"That makes two of us."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Alliance Space: Sol System<strong>

**\*\*Normandy\*\***

Racing away from a planet quickly descending into flames and death, the \_Normandy \_crew could only look on in horror as they retreated from their home world. Almost every soul on the ship was struck with a grave silence as monitors and screens showed the bleak reports from what few sources on there were left on the ground. The planet had been under invasion for only a few hours, and they had seemingly lost already. The idea of flying away while others were fighting did not sit well with any of the crew.

Near the cargo bay's armory, Shepard started strapping on his N7 armor, fully aware of the helpless situation they found themselves in.

\_"Setting a course for the Mass Relay, Commander," \_Joker said, his voice coming over the ship's intercom.

"Belay that order, Hackett wants us to go to Mars," Shepard said, while slipping his feet into a pair of boots.

\_"Mars?" \_Joker questioned, \_"Does he know that's in the complete opposite direction of Pluto."\_

Finally finishing putting himself into his armor, Shepard grabbed the gauntlets on the table in front of him. "They've found some kind of weapon hidden in the Prothean ruins. We need to retrieve it before heading to the Citadel." He slipped his hands into the gauntlets, flexing his fingers as they found their place in the glove. Sealing the armor together, he grabbed his Mattock and helmet before stepping into the shuttle.

James and Ashley were already awaiting him, both geared up for a fight. Through her helmet, Ashley watched Shepard board the shuttle, making sure she her gaze never met his.

"Commander," James shouted from the cockpit. "There's a storm approaching the research facility, we'll need to be quick and leave before it reaches us."

They could feel the \_Normandy \_entering the orbit around the red planet, the ship shook slightly as its speed slowed, significantly less so than before the Huragok was aboard.

Holding on to the hand rail above her head, Ashley began relaying information from her omni-tool. "Base was set up to research Prothean ruins, progress has been slowed recently due to lack of funding, but they found some kind of expert that helped decipher some of their tech. We lost contact with the base about an hour before the Reapers arrived in the system." As she spoke, she made certain to keep her emotions in check, fighting back the small urge inside telling her to curse Shepard's name.

As mulled over the facts in his head, Shepard only found more questions than answers. "Let's get in, find any survivors and get the data, then get out before that storm arrives."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Forerunner Gas Mine<strong>

\_"You must hurry Arbiter, the storm approaches. We can not stay with you for long." \_The deep gravel like voice called out to Thel through his helmet. He was now finding his way to the top of the floating facility, fighting through heretics and parasitic life forms as he went.

Not long after their arrival at the home of the heretical rebels and their leader, a shocking discovery occurred. The Flood had somehow been released onto the station, endangering the lives of every organism on board. Further more, Sesa had fled deeper into the facility, shielding himself behind a force field, intent on waiting out the storm behind his walls. Unable to let the Heretic Leader live, the Arbiter formed a plan to force the rat from his hole. He would cut the cables that bound the mine to the sky, forcing it to fall deeper into the gas giant's atmosphere. A task easier said than done.

Sprinting to the top of the final ramp to the mine's roof, the Arbiter activated his camouflage right as the light touched his skin. Unnoticed by both the Heretics and Flood forces fighting away, Thel

ran for the nearest cable. He could hear the cries of battle around him, Sangheili giving off battle cry as the small parasites over ran them, and the shrieks of pain when a Flood form was disintegrated by a Forerunner Sentinel. None knew of his presence.

He reached the cable as his cloaking device ran its last bit of charge. The Arbiter's armor was an ancient piece of equipment, never receiving upgrades or repairs, seen as a ceremonial blessing rather than a tool for combat. Hiding behind the large terminal housing the massive cable, Thel grabbed his sword from its holster, bringing the glowing blade to life in his hands. Without a second thought, he sliced the cable clean through, causing the entire structure to swing violently to the side.

All at once he fighting stopped, as both the Flood and Heretics were thrown from their feet. There were still two more cables holding the mine in the air, but the destruction of one was enough to send the fearful Grunts into a cowardly retreat. Now Thel had everyone's attention.

Unwilling to be doomed another chance at revival, the few Flood combat forms charged forward after him, completely ignoring the plasma striking their backs. Breaking out into a full sprint, Thel sliced his sword straight ahead of him, cutting the nearest combat form in two. Unwavering, he continued forward, easily slicing through the puss filled bodies that attempted to stop him. Reaching the second cable, Thel took a moment to glance behind his shoulder to find more Flood climbing over the walls. They were all intent on stopping him dead.

Again the facility swung violently as its tether was tarnished, a fresh plasma burn stood in place of the cable's former connection. It had taken Thel only a few seconds to swing his sword with enough strength to cut through the strong cable, but it was enough for his enemies to seize upon the opportunity.

A limb came swinging towards Thel from behind, coming down with the force and weight of a falling tree. Dodging to the side, the Arbiter narrowly avoided the arm hitting his backside. Taking a step back, he managed to turn around to face his opponent, giving a cry of rage as he thrust his sword straight through its body. With bodily fluids staining his face and armor, Thel violently threw the twitching creature to the side, easily sliding his plasma sword out as he did so. Another quickly took its place, taking up the hole left by its monstrous comrade.

Now two tree like arms swung down, as the Flood attempted to capitalize on Thel's momentary distraction. Its fist landed hard on the floor, easily avoided by the Arbiter as he jumped backwards, and, in one swift movement, threw a plasma grenade at the small group of combat forms that had chased him. It landed squarely on the closest, sticking firmly to its back as the creature attempted to give chase once more. A loud explosion sent all of them in multiple directions.

Without so much as a backwards glance, Thel made his way towards the third and final cable. As he ran, he could feel the familiar ting as his shields flickered from plasma fire, but he continued running unencumbered. Once he reached his destination, one last violent shake gave way to an almost weightless free fall.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Alliance Space: Mars<strong>

Reaching the airlock, Shepard and his squad gave off a breathe of relief as the room pressurized and they were able to remove their helmets.

"Care to explain what that was, Shepard?" Ashley asked, barely waiting for their environment to fill with air.

"What do you mean?" Shepard asked, walking over to the control panel.

Following him, Ashley continued, "Why the hell is Cerberus here?"

They had landed just five minutes ago, but it wasn't long before everything seemed completely out of place. Running down the hill from their landing site, James, Shepard, and Ashley were forced to watch Alliance soldiers being gunned down by a squad of men in white suits. It wasn't until they had finished fighting did the trio realize they were Cerberus.

"How would I know?"

Ashley's tone grew more aggressive. "You worked for them! How could you not?"

The door to the facility slid open, revealing a cargo bay. "Ash, I've been in deep space for six months with you and a hundred other crewmen. You really think I had time to talk with Cerberus."

"No, but what about while you were on Earth? Plenty of time then," she said, pushing herself into the Commander's face now.

"The Commander didn't have any contact while he was in Alliance custody," James said, interjecting his comment. He grew slightly worried at the look of fear and confusion in Ashley's eyes.

"It just doesn't make any sense," she stammered, lowering her head in confusion.

Placing his hand on her shoulder, Shepard forced himself to look her in the eye. "I know, but right now we've got a mission that needs doing. We can sort this out later."

Walking away from the airlock, the squad moved into the cargo hold, weapons raised.

"Seems awfully quiet," James commented, checking around the edges of containers as he did so.

As if to challenge his statement, a loud thud could be heard coming from above their heads, followed by an audible grunt. Looking towards the source of the sound, Shepard found an air duct, with bullets flying out of it. Raising their weapons, the trio watched as the vent was kicked from its place, slamming hard on the ground, followed closely behind by a blue Asari, who took the two story drop with a

tad more grace. Struggling out of the shaft were two Cerberus soldiers, pathetically moving through the claustrophobic space. Before they were able to move out, a biotic sphere lifted them into the air, and two expertly placed bullets punctured their skulls, causing their bodies to cease their flailing.

It wasn't long before the shock of what he had just witnessed vanished from Shepard's mind, and was instead replaced by a feeling of relief.

"Liara!" he shouted, rushing up to embrace the blue Asari in a tight embrace.

"Shepard?" Her tone came out in a surprised manner, shocked to see her Human Commander there so suddenly. "We were just getting the reports in from Earth, I thought you might be..." her voice trailed off.

"What are you doing here?" Shepard asked, managing to push himself away long enough.

"Hackett asked me to help study some of the ruins. I couldn't waste the opportunity to find something that might stop the Reapers." As she spoke, she rubbed her hands in that habitual manner of hers.

Stepping up next to the Commander's side, Ashley spoke up. "Good to see you again, T'Soni."

Liara nodded. "And you too, Lieutenant. But what are you doing here? Hackett said you were on some deep space scouting mission?"

"We just returned," Ashley answered, "and boy do we have a story for you."

Soft metallic footsteps interrupted their meeting, indicating the arrival of more Cerberus troopers.

"I'm afraid it will have to wait for another time," Liara groaned, taking cover behind the nearest crate.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Forerunner Gas Mine<strong>

Finally making his way into the mining station's hanger, Thel had at last managed to corner the infernal leader of the Heretics.

"You've nowhere left to hide," he shouted, making his voice heard across the large room. Seeing movement from the back of his eyes, Thel turned to see the Heretic Leader climbing on top of a Seraph fighter, which took up most of the space within the room. "Turn heretic," he ordered, keeping his carbine's sights trained on his target.

"Arbiter," came Sesa's calm and methodical voice. It was not hard to see how he was able to amass as large of numbers as he did. "I would rather die by your hands, than let the Prophets lead me to slaughter."

"You has taught you these lies?" Thel questioned, gripping his carbine ever closer to his body. Without warning, a small orb like machine appeared. It looked like a blue orb surrounded by a silver ring. "Impossible, the oracle?!"

"Greetings," exclaimed the eye. "I am 343 Guilty Spark. The monitor of the previous installation 04."

"Ask the Oracle about Halo," ordered Sesa, "how they would sacrifice our lives for nothing."

Brightening into a brilliant blue, Spark seemed excited at the request. "More questions? I will be happy to assist you."

Dumbfounded by the appearance of the Monitor at the Heretic's side, Thel was blindsided by plasma fire as Sesa took advantage of his surprise. "Our brothers are blind, Arbiter, but I will help them see."

Ducking behind a purple crate for cover, Thel waited for his shields to recharge, before activating his camouflage and peering around the edge of the crate. The Heretic Leader was floating away, carried by a propulsion device that carried him effortlessly into the air.

"Come out, Arbiter!" he shouted, "Show yourself."

Quickly, Thel moved below the cover of the Seraph fighter, sticking his head out long enough to easily target his target. As his cloak faded, he opened fire on Sesa, quickly dropping his shields before his foe had time to recover. Firing two plasma rifles, Sesa desperately tried to maneuver outside of the range of the Arbiter's arc of fire, but only succeeded in lowering himself closer to the ground. Strafing to his left, the Heretic took cover behind a pillar, waiting for his shields to recharge and his rifles to cool. An uneasy silence followed.

Looking around the side of his cover, Sesa found the Arbiter's last known spot empty, devoid of anything except thin air. He felt a sudden pang of fear tug at his throat. Glancing around the room, he remained completely unaware of the shimmering like shadow behind him until a sword had found its way into his abdomen.

Purple blood now stained the floor, as the Heretic Leader's last grip of life dribbled away across the ground. The Monitor had reappeared, floating just above the Arbiter who stood proudly over his kill.

"Unfortunate, his edification was most enjoyable," the machine said, with an almost mournful tone.

"I'm sorry, Oracle. I had no choice. This Heretic impeded the Great Journey."

"Oracle? Great Journey?" the machine questioned, "Why do you insist on using such inaccurate verbiage is beyond meeee." The machine's voice trailed off as it was forced against a large metal hammer, wielded by a massive Brute.

"Tartarus!" Thel cursed. "That is the Oracle!"

Thel had never trusted the Jiralhanae, appropriately named "Brutes" by the Humans. They all reeked of stupidity and the urge for power, a deadly combination in any species, let alone one so keen on taking the Sangheili's place in the Great Journey. And Tartarus was determined to lead them.

"So it is," the ape like creature grumbled. "Come along then Arbiter, we're leaving this place. Before this storm blocks our escape."

Grimacing, Thel followed the Brute Chieftain and his lackeys as they boarded the Phantom.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Alliance Space: Mars<strong>

Dropping below the safety of a crate, Shepard narrowly avoided a burst of fire aimed towards his head. One last squad blocked their way to their objective, and they weren't intent to simply surrender. Leaning out of his cover, Shepard took quick aim at the two nearest troopers, both focusing on keeping Liara and Ashley pined behind the pillar on the far side. They were unable to move as bullets skid past them, denting the metal and leaving behind small black burns.

After two quick shots with his Eagle, and the suppressing fire was two guns fewer. Another round pierced through the skull of another trooper, right as a grenade landed inside the group of three who had taken cover behind the security checkpoint. By now, Ashley and Liara were able to peer around long enough to land several hits against the enemy, dropping the remaining troops like flies. A second more, and the last gunshot ran out the end of Shepard's barrel, followed by an unnatural silence that was only broken by the sharp metallic clang of the squad emptying their thermal clips onto the ground.

"James," Shepard shouted into his radio. "Get the shuttle ready. We've almost got the data." He walked past the checkpoint, covered in shrapnel and blood from the gun fight. A Cerberus trooper was spread across the terminal, his shoulders protruding through the window, his back was ripped apart with metal and flesh stuck together as if put through a blender.

\_"Hurry, Loco. This storm is starting to pick up strength," \_came James's response.

Hurrying to catch up, Liara and Ashley stood silently behind Shepard as he attempted to open the door manually.

"You sure this Prothean weapon is worth it?" Ashley asked, moving to the other side of the door to help slide it open. Together, the both grunted as the gears were forced to move away from their resting position.

"It has to be," Liara said in a slight stammer. "What else can we use to stop the Reapers. You saw the destruction on Earth, they cut through your fleets like they were nothing." Silence followed her statement, they all knew the stakes were high. The Reapers had faced countless civilizations before them, and succeeded in wiping out all life each and every time.



"There may be something we can do," Shepard said, giving off one last grunt to finally force the door open wide enough to walk through.

Liara looked at the Commander in wonder. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"We'll tell you once we're back on the ship," Ashley said, ending the conversation as they walked into the room that housed the Prothean data. A large metallic pillar stood in the center of the room, attached to martian soil beneath, planted in the ground like a strange form of alien tree. It was surrounded by a glass window, completely shielding it from any physical contact. Only the occasional wire, connected to a corresponding computer, protruded from the Prothean device.

Immediately, Liara went to the closest terminal, and attempted to find and copy the relevant data regarding the Prothean weapon. Ashley started sweeping the room, unwilling to allow any Cerberus soldier to get the drop and surprise them. About to join her, Shepard was stopped suddenly as a small sphere like drone floated into the room. It stopped just ahead of Shepard, turning to face the Commander, before a hologram enveloped the device, creating the shape of an elderly Human male.

"Illusive Man," Shepard grunted. "Figured you'd work your way into this somehow."

"Don't act so surprised, Shepard." He paused long enough to take a puff from the cigar in his hands. "You and I both know the Alliance couldn't be trusted to keep such a powerful device from Cerberus."

Motioning for Ashley and Liara to continue working, Shepard kept the Illusive Man's attention focused solely on him. "What do you want?" he asked.

The hologram lifted his hand for another smoke before answering the Commander. "The same thing I've always wanted. For Humanity to take its rightful place in the galaxy and take control."

"You're just looking to control things for yourself," Shepard cursed.

"Control for Cerberus is good for all of Humanity. Just look at what the Alliance had here. They've known about these ruins for years, and they only now find the plans for this weapon?"

"Shepard," cried Liara. "The plans are being transferred and deleted, I can't stop it."

Looking back towards the Illusive Man, Shepard continued. "You shouldn't be fighting me, fighting anyone, but the Reapers. We need to be working together, you can't expect Humanity to win this war alone."

"Oh but I do," came the Illusive Man's somewhat amused response. "Isn't that what the Forerunners intended? For Humanity to be left in control of the galaxy's fate. You found that out for yourself, didn't

you Shepard."

Liara turned away from the monitor for a moment to look at the two. "Shepard, what's he talking about?"

"Tell the good Doctor what you found then, Shepard." His tone was almost mockingly smug now. "This Prothean weapon might not even be the most powerful discovery of late, is it?"

Reaching the far end of the room, Ashley shouted out to Shepard, attempting to grab his attention. She had found the Cerberus agent, the Dr. Eva Core was huddled in a corner just out of sight, looking over the data from her omni-tool with one arm, and carrying a pistol in the other. Without so much as a glance towards Ashley, Eva kicked the soldier off her feet. She jumped up and began sprinting full speed back towards the exit, all in one swift movement.

"We'll be in touch," came one last word from the hologram, before the drone deactivated and flew onto Eva's belt, attaching itself neatly.

"Shepard," Liara shouted. "She has the data, after her."

Not needing any other reason, Shepard started running full speed after her, desperate to tackle the impossibly fast woman. Grabbing his Eagle, he fired a few pot shots at her, squarely hitting her in the rear, only to realize her shields were recharging too quick to do any actual damage. Giving up on the idea entirely, Shepard gave his full concentration and effort to catching up.

She ran down several hallways, leading the Commander up a level, and then another. Once he had almost managed to grab her, but was stopped short as she miraculously gained a small boost in speed. However, she was finding her places to run few and far between.

It wasn't long before Eva charged through an air lock, quickly overriding the controls to force the compartment to depressurize and vent the atmosphere. Somehow she remained completely unfazed, lacking any type of protective suit or helmet. Shepard now found himself on the roof, taking a turn around to a stretch of solar panel arrays. Ashley and Liara had managed to catch up, but were both winded from the experience.

Almost expecting a surrender, seeing as Eva had no where else to run, Shepard was disheartened to find a Cerberus shuttle was awaiting her. Eager trooper hands grabbed the woman and pulled her into the vehicle. He was about to lose the best hope for the galaxy.

Just as his anger and frustration were about to tip over, a blue flash bounced out of the corner of his eye.

An Alliance shuttle was coming closer, quickly approaching at a frightening speed. A flash came from its cannons, followed by another, aimed squarely at the white Cerberus shuttle. With a great roar of desperation, the craft attempted to shrug off the incoming fire, but to no avail. A third blast from the shuttle brought it crashing down on the roof, a gaping hole burning into its top and side.

Signalling for the shuttle to land, Shepard waved his arms at James,

telling him to come in closer. Meanwhile, he, Liara, and Ashley, cautiously opened the Cerberus shuttle door, keeping their weapons ready for any survivors. Smoke filled their vision, clouding the entire of the shuttle, though they were able to see clearly the bodies that littered the craft's floor. Eva was next to the door, her flesh was completely burned off. However it wasn't muscle and bone that was showing, instead it was a bright metal skin, covered in dirt and soot.

"She's an AI," Ashley gasped, bending over to examine it closer.

"Grab it," Shepard ordered. "Might be useful."

James had positioned the shuttle next to the edge, hovering far above the ground below. He watched carefully as Ashley carried in the robotic body, still possessing every curve and structure it had had before, only in a more unnatural sense. Shepard and Liara followed, both grabbing on the the rails above their heads for support.

"Let's get out of here, James. Before that storm gets any closer," Shepard said, watching the large mass of dust approach quickly from the distance.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>Oh great scott it's done! Alright folks please tell me what you thought of the chapter and leave all your criticism in review form =).

>Couple of quick notes I should point out. I personally love the idea of running these two stories parallel to each other, and liked the similarities between the Arbiter's mission in Halo and the first mission on Mars, hence my purposeful use of the "storm" symbolism. I would have liked to given a little more exposition as to what's going on, back story wise, but I ultimately felt it was unnecessary. There's no point in me writing out the complete opening sequence of ME3. As for the changing of James's crash scene, well it's always bothered me that the dropship obviously has weapons but they're only ever used in one mission on Rannoch. I mean, why didn't James just use the bloody cannons in the first place! Makes no goddamn sense. As for the reason Ashley wasn't wounded, well again minor issue I had with the game. BUT the more important reason is what will take place in the next chapter so stay tuned. I do hope that I was able to make the small changes in a believable manner and that you all do approve of them.<p>

Couple of notes for the whole grande scheme of thins. First off, I'd like to thank all of you so much for helping me out with this story. I've almost reached a 100 reviews! That's huge for me. Not to mention that the last chapter saw the biggest increase in followers and favorites for this story, there's almost 40 followers now! This is just unbelievable.

>But I'm still 5 reviews away from a nice round 100, so I'll make a deal with you. If I'm able to receive 5 reviews within 24 hours of posting this new chapter, I'll post up the next chapter the very next day. AND I'll update the sequel to this story as well (Which has a much better narrative in my opinion).<p>

Of course, any support at all is appreciated and welcomed.

Now for the Polls.

>I have to keep the current poll going a little longer, seeing as the two options are now tied. So if you would like to alter the story and chose if Shepard kills or saves the Rachni, please go to my profile and vote. If I can't come up with a decision, I'm going with my game default. As soon as that poll is down, I'll post another one dealing with killing Ashley! I know we all love that.<p>

And as always, thanks for reading =).

## 24. Circles

**\*\*Ch 24\*\***

**\*\*Circles\*\***

**\*\*Sol System: SSV Normandy\*\***

Shepard stood in the \_Normandy's \_AI center, where most of EDI's hardware was stored, analyzing the site before him. On the table in the back of was the robotic body of Eva Core, whose twisted and mangled body would have left even the most flexible uncomfortable. Despite the fire and crash landing she had endured, the body looked very much in tact, with only the odd artificial skin having been burned away.

"So this is how they infiltrated Mars," he muttered to himself, amazed at the tenacity of the Illusive Man. "EDI, were you able to extract the plans?" he asked the empty room.

"I have, Liara is looking over them now," she said, her disembodied voice filling the silence of the room.

Turning around, Shepard started walking towards the exit. "Keep this thing locked down, and make sure it can't communicate with anything," he said, strolling through the medical bay.

\_"Um Commander," \_came Joker's voice over the comm system.

"Joker? What's wrong, have we reached the relay yet?"

\_"No sir, we're about to pass Earth." \_

"Have we been detected by the Reapers?" Shepard asked.

\_"Hackett wants us on a quick recon mission, over something in North Africa." \_

Giving off a sigh, Shepard walked to the elevator. Pushing the button to bring him to the second deck, he said, "Hold up, I'm on my way."

It only took a second longer for the elevator to ascend the level, its speed having doubled since their time on Halo. As he headed towards the cockpit, he passed Traynor and James, both exchanging nervous glances with the Commander.

"Alright, what does the Admiral want Joker?" Shepard asked upon reaching the pilot's station.

\_ "What I want is for the Normandy to scan the Covenant hovering over the middle of nowhere." \_It was Hackett who responded, coming through clearer now on the radio. His ship and fleet were now no longer in danger of the Reapers, who had all descended on Earth.

"I thought we were to head to the Citadel?" asked a slightly annoyed Shepard. "Now you want us to see what they're doing and run away again?"

\_ "Commander, the Reapers have spread out across every God damn continent across the globe. You and I both know what they're trying to do, but the Covenant decided to follow them here. And they're looking for something down there." \_Hackett's voice came back filled with agitation. \_ "Fly by, record, then head to the relay." \_

They had already decreased their speed, dropping out of FTL after only a few minutes escaping Mars. Now Earth was appearing again into view, a small marble, whose size was slowly increasing as they approached, against the back drop of empty space.

"Joker, take us closer," Shepard ordered.

"Aye, aye," Joker said, hitting the keys on his console as he did so. The \_Normandy's \_path turned, now headed straight for the planet.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Earth: UK<strong>

Death stirred in the air and a thick layer of dirt and soot clogged Church's lungs. Erin seemed to be fairing far worse and was bent over having a particularly violent coughing fit.

"We need to get moving, help me with Manny," Church said still over the unconscious body of his squad mate. As Manny lay on the hood of the car, Church was using a plastic respirator to keep his lungs free of the trash in the air.

Erin finally finished her coughing, "And where are we supposed to go?"

"Check the vehicles for any survivors, and see if any of them are useable."

She moved to the nearest car, opening the door she was greeted by a charred body that nearly fell on top of her. Shrieking in fear, she pushed the body to the side. After pausing a moment to collect herself, she activated the car. Unsurprisingly, it failed to roar to life. She moved on to the next.

Church noticed something, movement from down the road; he couldn't tell what it was. He pulled Manny down to the side of the card and pulled out his own pistol. With luck it would just be other survivors looking for help. Church wasn't counting on luck.

Erin noticed the sound as well and looked to Church for orders. She was in no mental capacity to think beyond instincts, which only told her to keep out of sight. Giving her the hand signal to stay low, Church gave a quick glance over the hood. He saw the movement more

clearly now, it looked like two humanoid shadows walking towards them. 'Husk,' he thought to himself.

He slumped back down out of sight. Taking deep breaths, he closed his eyes and cleared his mind, hoping to hear the husk before they saw him.

'Come on think past the pain, just a broken rib and maybe a collapsed lung. You can handle some damn husk,' Church thought to himself, desperately trying to ignore the pain in his chest.

One of them stepped on an arm, shattering the bone like a twig. Church could hear them clearly now, loud moans and ungodly sounds of pain coming from their bodies. They seemed to have stopped moving. Instead, they were scanning the horizon looking for anything else that might be alive.

Church held his breath as he leaned around the car, aimed quickly, and disposed of the closest one with a bullet to through the brain. The impact splattered the other husk with brain matter and blue goo, only adding to the already disturbing factor that was the Reaper creation.

The remaining Husk started to charge towards Church. Firing, he was only able to damage the husk in the chest not even seeming to phase the creature. Unable to move in time, the husk jumped across and over the hood of the car and landed on Church bringing him to the ground, and knocking his weapon out of his hand. Winded and dazed, Church could do nothing as the husk started to claw at his face. It wasn't long before the searing pain started to register in his mind. The husk suddenly stopped after the third swipe of his hand, and fell limp on top of Church's body.

Pushing the creature off of him, Church was startled to see that Manny had somehow not only regained consciousness, but had also found Church's dropped pistol and blasted the husk.

Manny smiled at him, blood still dripped down his lips from where he had lost a tooth in the crash. "Can we call it square?" he asked, still choking on blood.

Erin had finally reappeared from her hiding spot, "God damn it, Church. Don't scare me like that. I thought that husk had you for sure." She came up and fell to her knees embracing him in a hug.

Manny started to stir, "Nah they could never kill Church, but they did pretty him up a bit." He grunted and forced himself to stand. He extended his hand to Church, and assisted him to his feet. Erin helped as well, pulling Church to a standing position.

Grabbing another piece of gauze from the first aid box, Church started to wipe his face clean of blood. He glared at Manny, "I know you almost died there, but this is not the time."

"Sorry, trying not to think about it. You know all this," Manny said, shrugging his shoulders.

Church turned to Erin, "Any luck on a ride?"

"Yeah, but you're not going to like it."

Erin pointed to the other side of the street where a vehicle lay practically unharmed, compared to everything else littered on the road. It was an older car, Human made, with wheels and no mass effect engine. It had some sort of logo on the front of it, and the word mustang on the back. They walked over to the vehicle, giving it a quick inspection before deciding on whether to take it or keep searching.

Church looked it over, "Doesn't this thing run on gasoline? That stuff explodes right?"

Erin smiled and nodded, "It's the only one that will run. My daddy and I used to fix antique cars like these for collectors. I can drive."

Jumping into the back seat, Manny said, "I hope this thing can do off road, we'll never get through this highway."

Erin sat down and revved the engine, pushing the gas as she did so to make the car roar. Church sat down in the passenger seat, holding desperately onto the handle. "Just get us into the city. We'll try to reach Alliance command and find out how our forces are doing."

Looking around them, Manny frowned, "My guess is not well."

Erin put the car in gear and drove off the road onto the now charred dirt. She accelerated toward the now burning London sky line in the far distance. It wasn't too long before she was forced back on the road by houses in a neighborhood.

As the car slowed down to avoid any wreckage, Church looked out at the houses. All of them were destroyed or burning. One yard looked almost intact, but only the foundation to the house remained. As they drove by, Church noticed a dog, muddy with its tail between its leg whining over his now destroyed home and family. The dog noticed the car driving by and turned its head. The animal looked desperate and sad, everything it had known in its small world was now gone. Without any other option, it started to follow the squad down the road.

"All these lives, gone in an instant," Church said, more to himself than the others.

Erin looked over to him, "We knew this was coming, Shepard warned us. I just never actually believed it could be this bad."

Sitting up and placing himself between the front seats, Manny said, "Don't worry, we'll make the bastards pay. No matter what we have to do."

Church and Erin both looked at each other, shocked by what their normally timid comrade had to say. Breaking the silence that followed, Church spoke up. "Are you sure you're feeling alright?"

Leaning back into his seat, Manny responded, "I grew up in London, only place I can truly call home. I knew some of these people, used to go to barbeques in this very neighborhood. So you can bet your ass

I'm pretty fucking pissed. I've now lost my best friend, and my home to some alien robot bastards." He laid down in his seat and closed his eyes. "Wake me when we get there."

Continuing on his omni-tool, Church tried to contact anyone switching through all of the Alliance's channels. They were only a few miles before reaching what used to be downtown London, the only traffic they saw was the occasional husk or cannibal which was either avoided or quickly run down.

"Wait, pull over here," Church said pointing to the side of the road. "Turn into that alleyway."

Erin did so and cut the engine. "What happened?" she asked, looking over at Church.

A harvester few by in the street in front of them, causing an ear shattering scream as it did so. Behind it came several squad of cannibals and husk all searching for surviving Humans. Church and Erin slid into their seats hoping to go by unnoticed.

After several long minutes of silence, they dared to peek their heads out the back window. The street was now empty, save for a few freshly charred bodies.

Suddenly, Church's radio began to spew static as a transmission started coming in. It was faint but they could both still clearly hear a soldier's voice.

"This is Private Johnson, our commanding officer is dead and his lieutenant is shell shocked. We're fucking ensigns here! We weren't supposed to see any type of combat for another month. Half our squad is dead and the other half are wishing they were, we need some help god damn! Wait their firing stopped I think they! Oh no oh God!"

Church switched to another channel, this time they heard a woman's voice screaming incoherently. Every frequency was people calling for help followed by moments of static filled silence. Erin turned on the car's radio, the speakers blared with an automated warning message.

"Repeat, London is under attack from an unknown source of extraterrestrial origin. It is imperative that you find shelter immediately. All public services are unavailable. If you are unable to find proper shelter, remain there until help arrives."

She shut off the radio, unable to listen to the sounds of their world being destroyed. Even with the radio off, they could still hear the sounds of screams and panic, only to be silenced by gunfire. Erin leaned back in her chair, it seemed like hours since she had gotten any form of rest, and she didn't know when she'd have the chance again.

Church continued to check his radio, hoping, praying, for an order from somewhere. He began to worry that the Reapers had been able to completely wipe out all form of the Alliance military within their first few hours.

'No, not possible. Not even with the Covenant here. Someone has got



to be left alive.'

Finally, what seemed like a miracle finally happened. The radio buzzed with the sound of static followed by a voice. To Church, it seemed like the voice of God had finally spoken to him.

"This is Admiral Anderson. In accordance to war time policy, I am taking full control of all Alliance forces here on Earth."\_

'No, not God,' Church thought to himself, 'But pretty damn close.'

"We need to evacuate the cities. A rendezvous point will be disclosed on a secure channel momentarily. Our first and primary objective is to regroup and reorganize. It may seem hopeless, but I'll be damned if I go down without a fight. You know what's at stake here; it's the entire god damn galaxy. And we need every one of you to fight, or die. It's your choice. Anderson out."\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Normandy<strong>

It had taken them a few hours to reach Earth again. Making an FTL jump into orbit would have been far too risky, and would probably alert the entire Reaper and Covenant fleet they were coming. So Joker had to take it slow, gliding the \_Normandy \_home with extreme care. By the time they reached the atmosphere, Shepard and Joker were joined by Liara and Ashley in the cockpit.

"Anyone want to start making bets on why the Reapers aren't destroying the Covenant?" Joker asked, flipping a switch above his head.

"I just wish they would start killing each other already and save us the trouble," Ashley grumbled.

Liara stood there watching, her arms crossed, unaware of exactly what the crew had been through only a few months ago. "I only found out about them through the vids. What exactly were you doing after Harvest, Shepard?"

"Alliance reinstated me," he said plainly. "Went back to scout the planet, and found something alien."

Puzzled, Liara continued. "What 'something?'"

Before he was able to respond, Joker interrupted them both. "Three Covenant ships, two battle cruisers one assault carrier, directly ahead Commander. They haven't spotted us yet, shouldn't either. So long as they don't look out a window."

The cockpit window started to fill with the image of a massive ship, with curves reminiscent of a shark. It's silver coloring only added to its shark like appearance. Two more vessels, much smaller than the first but still massive compared to the \_Normandy \_even larger than the Alliance's dreadnoughts, hovered next to it, obviously escorting the much larger ship.

"Goddess," Liara exclaimed, "Look at the size of that

thing."

"Bigger than even Sovereign was," Joker said, with a slightly worried expression on his face. "But they don't have anything this old girl." He patted the dashboard in front of him, giving it an affectionate squeeze.

"EDI, picking up anything interesting?" Shepard asked the AI.

"Just a message, Commander. They're simply repeating 'Regret, Regret.'" EDI's voice came through the comm system, her familiar hologram failed to make itself visible.

"What could that mean?" Ashley asked, flabbergasted at the seemingly random transmission the ships were sending.

"Dear Humanity," Joker started, sarcastically. "We regret being alien bastards, we regret coming to Earth. And we most certainly regret the can of whoop-ass the Commander's about to unleash."

"Regret is a name, Jeff."

This brought a small smile to Shepard's face, the first one in weeks. "Have they noticed us yet?" he asked.

"No sir, no one has. They've deployed ground forces, but there's nothing there for them. They're just kind of, digging."

"Digging?" Ashley questioned.

"According to the drones," Joker responded flatly. "Wait, hold on. Reaper IFF just popped up on sensors. Looks like a Capital ship and three destroyers"

Holographic icons highlighted the Reapers through the \_Normandy's \_cockpit window, encircling the machines in a red icon. They all watched as the four Reaper ships flew closer to the Covenant's, neither fired a single weapon at the other. The larger Reaper moved to the front of the largest Covenant ship, landing neatly on its top, the smaller ones followed suit, using their arm like appendages to grip into the silver metal.

"What are they..." Shepard started. All at once Joker's control panel lit up with warning icons, diverting his attention away from the scene outside.

"Massive buildup of energy off the ship's bow," he said, silencing the alarms and pulling up a readout of the energy output. "They're jumping into FTL!"

"Inside the atmosphere?!" Liara shouted, causing more worry for them all. "That's impossible with a ship that huge."

"They aren't jumping with a drive core, Liara," Ashley said, bending over Joker's chair to get a closer look at the data herself.

A massive blue hole appeared before the Covenant carrier, causing the space around it to distort and shift in a shock wave that caused the \_Normandy's \_lights to flicker for a second. The two smaller ships moved forward and through the giant tear, vanishing into the void

beyond. The Carrier was starting right behind them, Reapers in tow.

"Joker, get us in right below that thing. We're going to follow it," Shepard ordered, taking a seat in the co-pilot's chair.

"What are you nuts?!" Joker yelled, fear gripping him away from the controls.

"They're after something we need to follow," he quipped. "Now punch it!"

Liara and Ashley exchanged fearful glances, not knowing exactly what they were getting into. None the less, they hurried from the cockpit, looking to buckle themselves down for the ride.

Activating the ship's pa system, Shepard leaned in close to the microphone. "Attention crew." His voice carried throughout the ship. "We're about to follow a Covenant ship into a slipspace wormhole. I suggest you tie down everything that's not bolted, and find your combat stations immediately."

The Normandy rocketed through the air, closing the space between it and the tear. They were right below the carrier now, cast inside its massive shadow, watching as the blue energy moved ever closer, until they passed through it. The entire ship shook, bolts seemed to be rattling inside the deck as the frigate started to literally tear itself apart, scaring its occupants into a complete panic.

A second later, and the violent shaking was gone. Replaced instead an almost weightless feeling, even though the artificial gravity was still working. The smoldering sky of Earth was gone, in its place where brilliant hues of orange and blue, dancing around them and the Covenant ship above.

"You know," Joker muttered, "if we weren't literally hurtling into a different dimension flying right next to genocidal squid-heads, this might be kind of pretty."

Shepard chuckled. "Take a picture, we'll make a memory out of it."

Before any of them could act or do anything, the view of slipspace was gone. Now blackness covered the Normandy, as they found themselves again in the emptiness of space.

"Adams, sit-rep," Shepard ordered into his radio.

Instantly, the engineer's voice came back at him. "Drive core's a bit out of whack, and the heat sinks may need a cool down soon, but I think everything else is solid."

"Think?" questioned Shepard.

"Well, EDI's on the fritz. She's not giving me a full response like she normally does."

"Get up to the AI core and check on her," Shepard said, before deactivating the radio on his omni-tool. "Joker, where are we."

"Well we're definitely not in Kansas anymore," he uttered with his usual sarcastic charm. "Computer has us somewhere between home and Andromeda. The jump must have fried the pulsar array." He slammed his fist on the left console, which immediately responded with a change in attitude. "Shit," he cursed, "think I broke a finger, at least it worked."

"Don't need it," Shepard said, pointing out the window into space. Joker followed his finger, trying to focus on a singular point among the twinkling stars and past the still bulking ship taking up much of their view. Though difficult, he could see what appeared to be a thin metallic ring, giving off a glimmer of light as it reflected a star in the opposite direction.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>Dun dun dun! And the plot thickens. As always, please feel free to drop a review and leave as much criticism as you'd like. All opinions are of course welcome!

Some news for you few regular views of the story. I've officially reached 100 reviews! Triple digits, this feels awesome =D. Of course I would like to thank everyone who took their time to leave a review, you are of course the awesome!

>As for the current poll on whether or not to kill the Rachni. Well I only received two votes for it, and it ended in a tie =. So we'll just go with my game default of saving the Rachni in ME3. If anyone of you would like to choose, there's still time. Just leave a review on whether or not you want to kill the Rachni during the events of this story. Every major choice will be chosen by you guys!

For those keeping score at home, officially the choices that will be made during the events of ME3 are:

Final Romance- Liara

>ME2 Romance- Miranda<br>ME1 Romance- Ashley

>Cure Genophage- Yes<br>Save Rachni- Yes

Next poll will pertain to the Quarrians. So go and take a vote if you'd like to alter the story and world state of \_The Cycle \_(Which can and will change all sequels spin offs and whatnots.)

25. They'll Regret That too

\*\*Ch 25\*\*

\*\*They'll Regret That too\*\*

\*\*Normandy: Unknown System\*\*

"Shepard, I told you to give me some recon on the Covenant, not follow them halfway across the galaxy," came the disgruntled voice of Admiral Hackett. He stood with his arms crossed, glaring disapprovingly at the Commander through the hologram.

Leaning on the rail between him and the hologram, Shepard gave off a frustrated sigh. "They came, and then left with the Reapers. Something didn't sit right. I saw an opportunity and I took

it."

"Udnia will be meeting with the council as soon as they arrive back from their home worlds. He's expecting you to be there to help testify for the invasion of Earth, and this Prothean weapon you found."

"The \_Normandy's \_the fastest ship in the fleet," he cursed. "We're not going in blind here, we know what's in store this time. We'll stop the Covenant from activating the Halo, then head to the Citadel and bring the council's fleets to Earth."

Shaking his head, Hackett voiced his disapproval. "You fail to see that the Reapers aren't just on Earth, this war will spread across the galaxy before long, Commander."

"None of it will matter if the Covenant activates the rings!" Shepard shouted, his frustration growing now.

"According to your report, they can't do that without a Human there."

"They might be able to find a way around it, we can't risk that."

Rubbing his chin, Hackett thought for a moment, carefully going over what few options he had left. "Alright, Shepard. You have two days, enough time for me to get the fleets regrouped. After that, I'm ordering you to leave and return to the Citadel."

"Thank you sir," Shepard said with a sigh of relief.

"And have Dr. T'soni send me the information you have on the Prothean device. I'll see what our scientist can make of it," Hackett said, as his hologram vanished from view.

Pushing himself from the railing, Shepard walked out of the communication room and into the war room, careful to avoid the large wires that spread across the floor. In the war room, the central hologram gave a detailed depiction of the entire system, showing the positions of the \_Normandy, \_Covenant, and Reaper ships, which had all landed on the ring's surface.

"Joker," Shepard said aloud. "Do we know where this Halo's activation index is?"

Before the pilot could respond, a metallic clank could be heard on the far side of the room, as the door to the conference room hissed open. The robotic body of Eva Core walked in, giving off a different stride than it had on Mars.

"As a matter of fact, we do." It was EDI's voice that spoke through the machine, giving the former combatant a somewhat friendlier atmosphere.

"EDI?" Shepard questioned. "Is that you?"

"Affirmative, Shepard. I thought this device would prove of use to you," she said, with an almost seductive smile.

Another person appeared behind her, leaning against the door frame when he saw the Commander within view.

"Sorry, sir," said a tired and weary Adams. "AI core had a small fire, but everything else is fine." His gaze moved over to EDI, "Though she did give me a heart attack, walking out of the smoke like that."

"My apologies, Adams. If you or the crew were in any danger, I would not have proceeded with the transfer." She started away from the door, followed closely by Adams, walking around the room to Shepard, who was still focusing on the hologram in front of him.

"You could have at least warned us," Shepard grumbled. "What are you planning to do with that thing anyway?"

Stopping next to him, she turned to observe the hologram as well, as if the machine's eyes were the only way she could see. "The \_Normandy \_is not equipped for every possible combat scenario. This body will allow me to assist you on the ground when needed."

"Could be useful, Commander," Adams piped in. "Especially if we're going where your thinking of."

"Speaking of which," Shepard interrupted. "EDI, what were you saying about the index?"

The hologram suddenly changed, now showing the ring's surface in minute detail. "There's a structure similar to the last Halo we were on, the activation index should be there as well. Assuming the rings work in the same way." She spoke in an almost matter of fact kind of way, as if this new body brought with it unseen emotions her previous avatar couldn't express.

"However," she continued, "There's something else that may interest you." The hologram shifted again, showing now where the Covenant had taken control of temple in the center of a large lake, their massive vessels floating above. Close behind were the Reapers, floating almost peacefully in the sky.

"What are they doing?" Shepard asked.

"Waiting, Shepard," the AI answered. "They don't know how to activate the ring, but it won't be long before the Prophet of Regret finds out how."

"Regret?" asked a curious Adams.

"One of the Covenant's highest religious and political leaders," EDI answered again. "One, of only three."

Now it was Shepard's turn to think in silence, going over any possible plan of action before he decided to commit to it. "You want to take that thing into combat?" he asked.

"Affirmative, Shepard." Her body seemed to tense up a bit, almost as if she was somehow nervous as to his next command. It worried the Commander slightly.

"Go and gear up, I'll meet you in the hanger." Without another word,

EDI spun on her heels and started quickly to the elevator. Once she was gone, Shepard turned towards Adams. "How's the ship doing?" he asked.

"So far, so good. Little shaken up after that surprise FTL she had, but I don't think I've ever seen her preform so remarkably well. That engineer really did a number on this. The stealth systems would have never lasted this long without him."

"And there's no sign the Covenant or Reapers will notice us?"

"It be best if we kept communications at a minimum, but they shouldn't. We're not giving off any heat signature or detectable radiation." As he spoke, Adams seemed to give off a proud gleam of hope. He truly believed the Normandy could lead them through anything, so long as Shepard was left in charge."

Grabbing a mug he had left on a nearby terminal, Shepard started walking towards the exit. "Good work Adams," he said, reaching the doorway. Pausing for a moment, he turned his head to see the engineer going over a data pad in his hand. "And don't let Joker run any suicide missions while we're gone," he said with a smile, before turning to head towards the elevator.

Upon reaching the lift, the doors slid open with a small hiss, revealing the worried expression donned by Liara. Stepping out of the elevator, she remained completely unaware of the Commander's presence, until she violently bumped into him, spilling what little remained of his coffee over his work uniform.

"Shepard," Liara gasped, "I was just on my way to find you." As she stuttered, Liara violently wiped her hands over Shepard's shirt, desperately trying to remove the liquid before it left a stain. Grabbing her hand gingerly, Shepard pulled it off of him and to their side.

"It's fine, Liara," he said with a smile. It had been nearly a year since he had last seen her, or anyone else from his old crew for that matter. The sight of her just seemed to bring back memories of old.

"Goddees," she stammered, pulling her hand away from Shepard's and placing it in her own. "I just don't know what to do." Nervously, she rubbed her hands together, in the nervous habit she had developed.

"Come on," Shepard said, motioning her into the elevator. Once they had both stepped on, he hit the button for the bottom deck, and the elevator began its descent. Looking to Liara, he could see the worry in her eyes, the pale expression of fear in her cheeks, which only troubled him further.

"Now tell me what happened after the Alliance took you into custody?" she asked, somewhat angrily. Not knowing something as seemingly important as his whereabouts did not sit well with the Shadow Broker.

"What, you don't already know?" Shepard asked teasingly.

"This isn't the time, Shepard." Her voice rose a tad in frustration,

giving an audible emotion to how she felt.

"I know," he responded, giving off a deep sigh. "It's just been too long since I've seen you, Liara. Any of you."

"Shepard," she muttered, her voice gaining a tender tone. Taking his hand in hers, she gave it a tight squeeze of affection. She started to give him another apology, some sign of compassion for the man who had just lost his home, only to be interrupted by the elevator door opening again.

The hanger bay appeared before them, Cortez was already readying one of the shuttles for a take off, while James and Ashley were busy strapping on their boots and armor. It wasn't long before Liara noticed the metallic body, adding a pistol to its belt. Pulling himself away from her, Shepard walked over to the locker, readying himself for more combat

"EDI?" she asked, blinking away the confusion. "That's a new look for you."

"Tell me about it," Ashley grumbled, obviously displeased by the sudden and drastic change. "First we were shooting flashlight heads, now we'll have one covering our six," she muttered to herself, prompting a glare from Shepard that silenced her on the subject.

"Alright everyone, gather round," the Commander said, popping into place his chest piece. He cringed a little as it pushed the still damp shirt against his skin. "We can't allow the Covenant to activate this ring." Glancing to Liara, Shepard could see she was still confused on the whole matter. Taking notice too, James pulled Liara aside, whispering to her a summarized version of their events of the last six months.

"EDI's also found a high ranking Covenant leader," he continued, "one who will finally give us some answers. So here's what we're going to do. James, Liara and I will fly in with Cortez and fight our way to him. Ashley," he pointed towards his squadmate, who straightened at the call of her name, "you're going to take EDI and secure the index. Once Joker picks you up, we'll hopefully be ready for extraction with Cortez, so long as shit doesn't hit the fan."

"Which it inevitably will," Ashley grumbled, still slightly agitated. She finished gearing up with the rest of them, strapping her gauntlets into place before grabbing her sniper and rifle. Liara found herself some spare armor, easily slipping in to the white painted pieces, before strapping an smg to her belt. Seeing that everyone was geared up and ready, Shepard ordered Liara and James into the shuttle, before turning around to see Ashley, standing there watching them.

"Commander," she stuttered.

"What is it now, Ash," he said, crossing his arms and awaiting a response. She seemed to fumble around for a moment, having the words stuck under her tongue, desperate for release.

"Look, I'm sorry about what I said. About Cerberus, you." She spat out the words quickly, desperate to move past the awkwardness of the



whole situation. "About us," she whispered after a long pause. Biting her tongue, she turned her face away from Shepard's, unable to meet his eyes with her own.

"Ash," he sighed. "It's fine, can we just move on?"

She turned to face him before responding, her earlier awkwardness replaced now with agitation. "Then why aren't you taking me? I should be the one covering your ass."

Taking a step off of the shuttle, Shepard placed his hand on her shoulder, trying to physically reassure her of his intentions. "Someone needs to find that icon. EDI can't do it alone, and I wouldn't trust James to go in by himself."

"Hey, I resent that," came the disgruntled voice of James from the shuttle, causing Ashley to give a small chuckle.

"Alright skipper, just try not to go all lone wolf on us again."

With that, Shepard walked back into the shuttle, gripping the handrail tight once he was on board. The shuttle door closed, and the hanger bay opened, bringing with it a blast of warm air from the ring's surface.

"All set, Commander?" Cortez asked from the Kodiak's controls.

"Ready when you are."

Floating up from the deck, the shuttle maneuvered out from open hanger bay door, before its engines roared to life and took the small ship in the opposite direction of the \_Normandy. \_

"So you and LC going to be alright?" James asked, somewhat mockingly.

"She seems more irritable, from what I remember," Liara chimed in.

Shepard looked at them both, eyebrow arched in a mock hurtful face. "Just remember you two haven't always been the most pleasant to be around. You didn't seem too keen on leaving Earth the first time James."

"Don't know what you're talking about, Loco," James said, turning his body to avoid delving further into the topic.

"Sure you don't, James," Shepard said with a laugh, noticing his squad mate's embarrassed reaction.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>Right starting this next section off with a heavy dialogue part. Don't worry, there'll be a lot of action coming next round. We're reaching the middle point, and I'm excited to see how everyone reacts with the Arbiter as a squad mate! Hopefully I can stay true to all the characters, and I trust all of you will be more than willing to correct me when I don't.

Don't forget that you can go and vote for the major decisions on my profile poll to alter the storyline here!

As always, thanks for reading and feel free to drop a review =)

P.S. I forget to mention something last chapter, but just so you guys know how much research I've actually put into this story. At the start of the year 2186 Mars, Earth and Pluto will be in a relatively straight line with each other. Meaning that going to Mars from Earth, then back to Pluto, would cause one to travel straight past Earth again. Granted this is before the cannon Reaper invasion, but hey it's a minor detail that I did consider before writing it.

## 26. What Lies Below

**\*\*Ch 26\*\***

**\*\*What Lies Below\*\***

**\*\*Surface of Halo:\*\***

**\*\*Covenant Occupied Territory\*\***

"I'm afraid that's as far as I can take you, Commander," Cortez said, as he set the shuttle down on the grassy hillside. "Too much air patrol on the other side of this mountain."

The ground below was dotted with marble like ruins, covered in vines of vegetation, giving the ring an almost ancient feel. Shepard and his squad stepped off the shuttle, their boots pressing into the moist moss covering the ruin's ground.

"We'll signal you when we need evac," Shepard said, waving his hand to signal the Kodiak to leave. Weapons drawn, Liara and James scanned their immediate area, eyes keen to any trap that might await them. Pulling his rifle off his back, Shepard pointed ahead of them, towards the ruins built into the mountainside.

Leading the way, Shepard walked into the open temple, careful to keep his eyes trained in all directions. It wasn't long before the natural light was gone, as they walked into a long tunnel that lead straight through the mountain.

"This is supposed to open up past their main force," Shepard said aloud, glaring at the map on his omni-tool. Soon enough, natural light appeared at the end of their long tunnel. Stepping through the exit, Shepard was almost blinded by the change, as his eyes struggled to adjust. His helmet's hud dimmed, easing the brightness on his retinas. His eyes now clear, Shepard was amazed at the site before him. A massive lake sprawled out from the mountaide, beautifully reflecting the crystal blue sky above. The mountain itself was sprawled with lush grass, rolling through the hill like a natural carpet, while the structure itself stretched out along the mountain, before turning into the water, pathway high in the air away fro the rippling surface.

"Fascinating," Liara stammered, eyes gleaming across the entire view. "An entire self sustaining biosphere. It's amazing just to think how

they might retain an atmosphere on such a small surface."

"Focus, Doc," James said, walking up beside the Asari. "Forget what I told you, these things weren't meant for sight seeing."

"I still find that hard to believe," she said. "How can any civilization build a galaxy wide weapon? It doesn't seem possible."

"Isn't that what we're hoping the Prothean weapon is?" Shepard asked her. "One galaxy wide Reaper killer." "Fair point," she said, before the trio continued across the walkway. Following the path, they hurried down the mountain side, the marble like path built neatly into the mountain. The only sign the temples had aged at all, was the lengthy amount of plants and vines growing along the floor and wall, giving the dull gray walls a bright vibrant green.

Their path curved left, running almost perpendicular to the mountain itself, and out into the body of water, still several stories above its surface. A kind of island awaited them, covered in more mossy green that peeked up through the cracks in stone.

"We've got trouble," James said, pointing to the other end of the small island. Following his gaze, Shepard saw a purple drop ship appear from the horizon, breaking away from the fleet of ships above the temple island on the far side of the lake. It flew level and straight, headed straight for them with its weapons drawn.

"Looks like they know we're coming," Liara said, taking cover behind a pillar. Shepard and James followed suit, crouching behind separate rocks as the Phantom hovered on the far side of the island. As the aliens fell from the ships gravity well, they met a hail of bullets.

Reacting quickly, one of the Elite commanders activated a small device, and threw it on the ground in front of him. The device stuck into the ground, creating a bright blue shield to cover him and the others floating down inside. Once he was joined by the remainder of his squad, which included two more Elites and four Grunts, he ordered them to leave the confines of the shield.

The Grunts moved forward first, panicking as they left the safety of the shield. They exposed themselves slowly, testing the outside to see if their flesh would be immediately seared. Without any other option, they sprinted outside of the shield, jumping behind the remains of a small wall. The Elites quickly followed, as the bubble shield lost power and failed behind them. As they ran, the aliens continuously fired on the squad, keeping them pinned behind cover.

"Liara!" Shepard shouted, "Singularity, now."

Following the Commander's order, Liara used her biotic energy to create a disturbance directly to where the aliens were covered behind. Without warning, the Grunts were lifted off the ground, floating slowly into the air and knocking into each other. The floating Grunts caught the Elites off guard, who were also beginning to lose their footing, one attempting to grab at the grass below him as his feet lifted above his head. Their bodies now fully exposed, Shepard and his squad unleashed a sea of bullets, ending the aliens

desperate flailing as they tried to find their way down.

"Wasn't so bad," Liara said as the dust and smoke settled. "The way you described them out to be, I was expecting something more."

"You haven't seen them up close," James said, moving towards the rear of the island.

Walking out of cover, Liara started for the now motionless aliens, curious as to what they looked like. Noticing one of the large Elites, laying flat on its stomach, she pushed it over with her boot, revealing the armor clad body littered with fresh gaping wounds.

"I'll admit they're not the friendlies looking species," Liara said, "but I think 'flesh eating squid-monsters' might have been an over exaggeration."

"You're the doc, Doc," James said, reaching the far side of the island with Shepard.

Looking out across the lake, to the temple island below the hovering Covenant and Reaper ships, Shepard couldn't help but notice what appeared to be part of the temple floating off of the island and coming towards them. "Do you see that?" he asked aloud.

"Yeah, and it's coming closer," James said, looking through the scope of his rifle. "And it looks like our ticket over there."

"Chances are it will be packed with reinforcements," Liara said, joining the duo at the edge of the island. "At least there will be less to fight once we're inside the temple."

Shepard shook his head, laughing wholeheartedly at her comment. "I thought you would have learned after we took down the Shadow Broker, there's always more enemies to fight."

"It doesn't hurt to be optimistic," she said mockingly. They positioned themselves behind more cover, waiting anxiously as the gondola approached. It was easy to see the Covenant had packed every spare hand they could onto the thing, eager to take the island and extend their perimeter. Once they were within range, the squad opened fire, careful not to stay out of cover long enough for their shields to drop.

It didn't take long for the combination of warps, bullets, and singularities to clear the gondola of the Elites and Jackals. The few remaining Grunts ran in fear, completely bypassing the squad as they sprinted towards the safety of the mountain behind them.

"Have to admit," James said, loading in a fresh thermal clip from his belt. "Taking down these things is a lot easier with a biotic with us."

"You're welcome, Lieutenant," Liara responded, as she moved to the front of the gondola. Once there, she searched for some kind of control panel that would allow them to take the device back across the lake. She was almost surprised to find a holographic pad waiting for her. With a slight jerk, the structure started moving across the water, floating effortlessly on a beam of light that ran across from

one island to another. "Fascinating," she muttered.

"Feel like setting up an excavation?" Shepard asked, stepping up beside her.

"If only I had the time. This entire structure changes everything we know about galactic history. To think, there was a civilization older than the Protheans, with technology we can only dream about." As she spoke, Shepard couldn't help but notice a small twinkle of wonder develop in her eyes. "Think about how much we could learn, the things they could teach us."

"You're cute when you want to excavate," Sheaprd said with a smirk, causing the Asari to blush in embarrassment.

"Shepard," she muttered, her cheeks flooding with warmth.

"More on the way," James said, coming up and taking cover next to them. Another structure, identical to the one they were riding, straddled a different beam of light, taking it towards the island. On it, were more Covenant forces, all intent on ambushing their enemies and preventing them from finishing onward.

Taking cover next to James, Shepard prepped a grenade from his belt, and chucked it into the center of the other gondola as it passed their own. A loud explosion was coupled with shrieks of pain as the explosive sent shrapnel into the aliens.

"What are those things!" Liara shouted, taking Shepard's concentration towards her. She was sanding behind a ramp, peaking over just enough to have her pistol ready to fire. Following her gaze, Shepard saw what had caused her surprise. Dozens of massive bugs started swarming towards them, flying away from the second gondola where they were hiding below its floor.

"Damn bugs," James grunted, as he blew the closest one to pieces. "Why'd it have to be bugs?"

Despite their strikingly frightening appearance, with hideous green bodies with deafening beetle like wings, the Drones were fairly fragile, taking only a few well placed shots before Shepard and his squad were able to drop them out of the sky. Their only problem was avoiding all the fire they gave in return.

"Just think, it could be worse," Shepard said, shooting the head off another Drone as it flew by.

"And how could this possibly be worse?" Liara asked hysterically, attempting to freeze a Drone into a stasis. The bug now frozen in its mid air position, it was only a matter of seconds before it found its limbs scattered about the floor.

"You haven't seen anything yet, T'soni," he shouted, trying to raise his voice louder than the wailing of the insect's wings.

"Try not to psych her out, Loco," James shouted in return, blowing a hole clean through the last of the flying monsters. He wiped his armor, attempting to clear it of the green blood that now covered him.

The other gondola passed them, as each continued forward toward its separate destinations. Coming closer now, the squad could see temple clearly. A small alcove waited in front of them, the obvious site where their gondola would dock for them to land. Above was a kind of balcony, large enough to house a small army, attached to the sharp tower that protruded into the sky. On the balcony were a small squad of Jackals and Grunts, weapons raised to fire on them.

However, they never received the chance. Once the gondola was in range of their weapons, the squad rushed forward toward the alcove, dodging the incoming plasma with ease. They had to jump the small distance, but managed to land safely below the enemies above. Recovering from the fall quickly, Shepard readied himself as another squad of aliens came walking from a door in the rear. A few well placed shots, and the Jackals and Grunts dropped where they stood.

"Come on," Shepard ordered, beckoning his squad mates to follow.

Now inside the temple, they moved with extreme haste and speed, not wanting to be trapped in the hornets nest. They walked through another door, one that opened up into an expansive room, and quickly disposed of the two Elites that blocked their way, their shields doing nothing to protect them from Liara's biotics.

They continued up a ramp that lead to a large open door way. Beyond which, a massive hallway appeared, looking more akin to a grande throne room than the inside of a temple, with large elaborate pillars dotting the sides in a grande fashion. Stepping into the room, the squad immediately started for the door at the far end, only to be stopped by more plasma fire. From behind the pillars dozens of Grunts appeared, followed by Elites and Jackals.

"Ambush," Jame shouted, crouching as pink needles soared over his head. They were surrounded on all sides, every direction brought with it more weapons aimed right at them. For Shepard, time seemed to slow, maybe due to the imminent fear of death, or the adrenaline pulsing through his system. No matter where he looked, there didn't seem to be a way out. A wall of plasma and needler fire appeared, seeming to envelop his entire vision. Closing his eyes, Shepard braced himself for the impact, unable to look directly at his inevitable death.

The blinding flash of plasma was gone, now replaced with a dimming blue as a biotic field enveloped him and James. Blinking his vision clear, Shepard looked behind him to find Liara, hands raised and feet planted firmly into the ground, struggling to produce an energy field to shield them from the incoming fire.

"This isn't as easy as it might seem," she struggled to say, already straining from the energy required to keep the biotic field stable.

"You just need to keep it up till we reach the door," Shepard said, regaining his composure. The Covenant had recovered from their moment of surprise, unable to fathom how an organic would be able to produce such a powerful force field, and began firing again, trying desperately to break through to the Humans beneath.

Nodding in understanding, Liara struggled to push one foot forward in

front of the other. Every muscle in her body ached, as the contentious plasma fire withered away her biotic barrier. Though the door couldn't have been more than a few meters away, the distance seemed vast to her, but she continued on through the pain, unwilling to let her friends die there.

They had made it halfway through the hallway, when the firing suddenly stopped. Ahead of them, two massive creatures stepped out of the shadows from opposite sides of the hall, each sporting a large energy cannon as an arm, and a metallic shield as another.

"Hunters!" Shepard shouted in distress

Glancing up, Liara could see the worry on his face as the two things approached closer, their shield arms raised to protect their bodies. The pain was becoming too much to bear, she dropped to her knees overencumbered by her energy output. The Hunters were inside the blue field now, headed straight for the Asari trapped on the floor.

It was James who charged forward first, with his Eviscerator drawn, he fired at the closest Hunter, distracting it from continuing on. He emptied his clip into the creature's belly, most of the pellets bouncing off as they struck nothing but armor. Now within arms length, the Hunter swung its shield arm, intent on slapping the Human aside, but was surprised when James narrowly avoided the attack.

The second Hunter continued on towards Liara, unable to fire its cannon due to the proximity of the Asari. Before it was able to reach her, Shepard stepped in front of its path.

"You gotta go through me first."

As if obliging his demand, the Hunter swung its arm down to crush the Commander. Reacting quickly, Shepard brought his arm up above his head, a bright orange glow enveloped his arm as his omni-tool activated. The Hunter's shield struck hard, almost shattering Shepard's arm on impact. Grunting, Shepard attempted to push up, as both of their appendages pressed against each other. Instead, he found the strength of the Hunter to be forcing him down, dropping to one knee as the shield pressed against his omni-blade.

Meanwhile, the first Hunter was still desperate to slap James from its path, but still failed to hit him as with every blow was only met with the resistance of air. After dodging the last swing, James pulled his shotgun to bear, slapping in a thermal clip as the Hunter struggled to regain its momentum. Its shield came down from above, and James dove forward and behind the Hunter, using his momentum to roll around into a crouching position. In one swift motion, he stood and turned around, now facing the back of the hulking alien, and fired at the small gap between its armor where orange worms protruded. Giving off a wail of pain, the beast fell to the ground in defeat.

With the sudden loss of his bond brother, the second Hunter's rage grew. Even though it could not see the first's demise, he could still feel as the life went cold. The Hunter moved its arm up, giving Shepard a moment to breathe, his arms and shoulders almost torn apart by the weight of the Hunter. Turning around to face James, the Hunter bent its legs and launched itself into the air, its arms raised high above its head as the creature attempted to crush James beneath its

weight.

Jumping to the side, James slid across the ground, almost directly outside of the still wavering barrier. Once the Hunter had landed, its force causing the floor to bend and break, it took it a moment to realize it had missed James entirely. So consumed by rage that it had failed to notice the Human was now out of his reach, and that Shepard had managed to recover from his earlier exhaustion.

Pulling a pistol from his side, Shepard fired on the Hunter, his arms barely able to handle the recoil of the weapon. Now the Hunter's focus returned towards Shepard, even as James positioned himself to fire his shotgun. With both Humans combining the fire, the Hunter raised its shield to protect its more vulnerable areas, but it could not protect every part of its body from the different angles. It didn't take long for Shepard's incendiary ammo to burn through his armor, flailing the worms that were inside. Now the second Hunter crumbled to the ground, unable to withstand the onslaught of fire.

"I can't hold this much longer," Liara said, as the beast fell to the ground with a thud. Already the barrier was beginning to shrink around them, wavering as Liara's strength fled. Moving over to her, James helped the Asari to her feet, wrapping his arm around her to help carry her weight. Together, they hobbled to the door, all the while the rest of the Covenant had continued its onslaught of plasma fire. Shepard followed closely behind, the barrier's thinning radius preventing him from moving too far away.

They had finally reached the end of the hall, the barrier itself, now only a fraction of its former size, fizzled out as the door opened before them. Passing through, James carried Liara through, while Shepard covered their retreat, turning around only when he was sure the pair had made it in safely. Once he had made it out of the hall, James activated the holographic lock, sealing the door behind them.

It was quieter now, the seemingly endless weapons fire now stiffened. The trio took a minute to regain their strength, exhausted after having to simply cross the hallway.

"I take it those were what I hadn't seen yet?" Liara asked, sliding down a wall to rest on the ground.

Rubbing his sore shoulder, Shepard responded. "Told you it could always be worse. Besides, that wasn't nearly as bad as taking down that Yahg."

"If I remember correctly, I did most of the work there too."

Shepard laughed slightly at her response, taking the time to help Liara to her feet. "Come on," he beckoned. "We need to keep moving."

Following him, Liara and James pulled out their weapons, following Shepard closely as they started to leave the first room.

"You guys must have some pretty crazy stories, huh?" James asked, as they passed through another door, locking it behind them.



"Stick around long enough, and you may find a few yourself," Liara said mockingly.

At last they came to another door, slightly larger than the last few, and moved to the sides before opening it, with James and Liara leaning against the opposite wall of Shepard. Holding his hand up, the Commander counted down from three, expecting them to walk through the door on his mark. Readying themselves, the squad prepared to breach through the door.

As soon as Shepard reached zero, the trio charged through the door, immediately sprinting towards a railing across a small pathway. Having a clear view of the room, they could see the door opened up to a balcony, with two ramps going down opposite sides to the floor below, where a contingent of red armored Elites stood, encircling a frail looking alien sitting atop a floating throne.

"Think they noticed us?" James asked, as they all ducked behind the railing out of sight.

"It doesn't appear so," Liara said, giving a sigh of relief.

Before they were able to act, a small squeal interrupted their thoughts. Glancing over to the ramp, the squad noticed a single Grunt had noticed them, and held its pistol out towards them. It seemed frozen in fear.

"De..." it muttered, barely able to produce an auditory sound behind the trauma. "Demons!" the Grunt shouted, receiving a bullet in its skull for the trouble. Now the rest of the room was alerted to their presence, and a group of Elites began charging towards their position, some carrying brightly decorated spears as they charged up the ramps.

"Who dares defile my sermon?" the Prophet in the throne demanded, shouting above the clamor of armored feet marching. "Kill them all!"

The trio had managed to stop most of the Elites from gaining any ground, giving off enough suppressing fire to slow their advance. It seemed as though they were intent with running into a hail of bullets, to die in a vain attempt to rush the intruders.

"Running low on clips!" James shouted above the commotion. As if to emphasize his point, James's rifle gave off an exasperated spat of overheating, as he reached to his belt for his last thermal clip.

"Liara," Shepard started, before an onslaught of plasma fire caught him off guard, forcing him to duck behind the railing again. "Try to see if you can take down that Prophet, we'll cover you."

"I'll try," she said, slapping in her last thermal clip into her smg. Peeking over the railing, she looked to the ground below the balcony, determining the distance she had below her. After thinking it over for a split second, Liara pulled herself up and over the railing, using her biotics to gracefully float to the ground. Meanwhile, James and Shepard continued to suppress the other aliens, forcing them to remain behind cover.

Managing to avoid the incoming fire from the few Jackals who managed to spot her, Liara sprinted for the Prophet still floating in his throne in the center of the room. The frail looking alien shrieked in fear as the blue alien drew closer to him. Using her biotics to provide extra lift, Liara jumped forward towards the Prophet, tackling him out of his flying throne.

Pulling herself and the Prophet up, Liara pointed her weapon at his head, her other arm tightened around his elongated neck, while the Elites, now aware of her presence, attempted to surround her.

"I'd suggest dropping your weapons," Liara said, completely in control of the situation.

"Fools," the Prophet spat as the arm grew tighter around him. "Do as she commands!"

Without another option, the surrounding aliens dropped their weapons, obviously intent on finishing the fight once they found an opportunity.

"I do not know what you want, you vile blue harpy," the Prophet spat again, struggling to find some kind of command in his point of powerlessness. "But your interference will not hinder the Great Journey."

"Just keep talking," Liara said, dragging the Prophet back past the Elites, her weapon never straining away from the alien's head.

"The Prophets of Truth and Mercy will never allow my capture to go unpunished!" he shouted again. Just as Liara reached the foot of the ramp, with Shepard's and James's weapons aimed at the Elites, a bright blue flash illuminated the entire room, originating from a vast skylight above. Looking towards the sky through the window, the entire room could see hundreds of ships entering into view, all popping out small rifts in space. An entire Covenant fleet appeared out of nothing, followed by a massive space station, appearing next to them in the same manner.

"Damn," James muttered, his attention momentarily occupied by the fleet entering space. "That's one big fleet."

"Surrender now demons!" Regret snapped, a state of victory glaring over his eyes, even as he struggled at the arm around his neck. "And your death may yet be swift and..."

His statement was cut short as one of the Covenant ships broke from its formation and flew straight for the island, the underside of its hull glowing with a build up of energy.

"No, that traitor," he continued, fear finally encroaching his voice. "I haven't perished yet!" he shouted, in some vain attempt to talk to the ship above. The Elites too were filled with some kind of fear and confusion as the Covenant ship positioned itself directly above them. A second later, and their confusion was gone, replaced instead with an intense plasma fire as half of the temple was destroyed, wasting away into the water far below.

When the plasma had settled, only the balcony and ramps remained. The entire bottom floor had been wiped away from existence. Liara had

almost been caught in the blast, only saved when she released the Prophet in favor of saving her own skin. Now he and his compatriots were gone, destroyed by the very allies they hoped would save them.

"Time to leave!" Shepard shouted, pulling up his omni-tool to contact Cortez. "Steve, we need an evac. Lock onto my signal and hightail it over here."

Another blast shook the temple, from the other side, bringing with it a wave of heat and fear as a different ship started glassing the entire island. The one above them, which could now be seen clearly through the hole it had created, started charging up its weapon again, intent on finishing off anything left alive in the temple.

Suddenly, the Kodiak appeared, flying from the underside of the island to position itself inside the now smoldering ruins. The door slide open, as the shuttle moved closer to the balcony. Jumping in, James watched as Shepard walked to the ramp to assist Liara to the top. "Hurry up!" he shouted.

Once on her feet, the pair sprinted up the ramp, hurrying towards the safety of the shuttle at its top. Liara managed to jump in first, assisted through the door as James pulled her in. A collapsing wall forced Cortez to dodge, as rocks crushed the edge of the balcony, narrowly missing Shepard.

"Get out of here!" Shepard yelled, waving his arms for them to leave, right as another bright plasma bolt of plasama stoke the temple closer behind him. The Covenant ship above had finished its charging, and was already laying waste to the other end of the temple, destroying what little remained, and forcing Cotez to flee as more of the surrounding rocks fell from above.

Looking behind him, Shepard could see the literal wall of plasma encroaching on him, blocking the path that lead to his escape. Unwilling to stick around for it to reach him, he sprinted off the edge of the balcony, now a flat cliff side with burning edges, and fell straight towards the water below. Hitting it hard enough to almost render him unconscious, even through his armor and helmet. Yet he could still fell the water encircling his body, seeping through some cracks that had formed in the fighting, as he sunk lower into the water.

Even through the damp coldness that slowly encircled him, Shepard felt something else entirely, something solid and strong.

"This is not your grave," a voice called to him, as the light slowly dissipated from his eyes. "But you are welcome in it."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Oh yeah, so this is still a thing. Had this chapter done for a while, but needed to do some edits before I posted it. That day of editing turned into a couple of months of what not. I'm not sure how many people are still regularly following this story, but if I get one review after posting this, I'll finish the next chapter and post it the day after! I've got to get this damn thing done XD<strong>

## 27. Et tu Brute

**\*\*Et tu Brute\*\***

**\*\*Surface of Halo: \*\***

**\*\*Library\*\***

Walking down to the bottom of a ramp, Ashley looked around the area, her Revenant steady as she prepared for the possibility of ambush. Much to her surprise, nothing appeared, the only motion was that of the wind bustling vines across stone pillars.

"Thought there would be something here," she said, as EDI strolled up casually next to her, gun left magnetically stuck to her leg.

"We shouldn't encounter any resistance yet, Lieutenant Williams," she said, continuing on to the door of the large temple that stood before them. "The Covenant doesn't know how to activate the rings. Or that Humans are required to do so."

Ashley grumbled, lowering her rifle finally in an attempt to calm herself. "Never hurts to be prepared."

A moment later, and the door slid open with a rhythmic swish, allowing Ashley and EDI to step inside. Suddenly, before stepping foot into the doorway, they were stopped dead in their tracks by a thundering sound. Behind them a Covenant drop ship flew over head, smoking slightly as it flew into their field of view. Trailing the ship, two Human designed star ship fighters were attacking it, sporting the color and logo of a Cerberus fighter squadron.

"Cerberus, here?" Ashley stammered, looking to EDI in both rage and confusion. The machine only blinked, also dumbstruck as to how Cerberus had managed to find the Halo installation. Another shuttle flew past, this time sporting the familiar design of a Cerberus Kodiak.

"We must hurry," EDI said, pulling her smg out and rushing into the temple, followed close behind by Ashley. Both woman sprinted down the hallway, their path illuminated by the low glow of lights in the floor and walls, all the while light from the sun quickly vanished in the distance of the temple.

It wasn't long before they finally reached an elevator, or the Forerunner equivalent, a floating platform that hovered motionless in the air. Stepping onto the platform, Ashley pressed the console in the center of metal floor, immediately starting their decent deeper down into the ring's surface.

"Above us," EDI called, her weapon now pointed up towards the floor they had just vacated.

"Down there!" another voice shouted, as if mocking EDI's warning with his own. A Cerberus squad had managed to follow them into the temple, having apparently defeated what ever the Covenant force was they were attacking. However it was they had found them, Ashley was determined

to stop them from following any further.

Crouching on her knee, Ashley aimed at the increasingly distant targets above her, and braced herself for the kick of her rifle as she fired multiple rounds at the Cerberus troops, who jumped back to avoid harm. Slowing her rate of fire, before stopping entirely, Ashley waited for the soldiers' inevitable return to the ledge to exchange their own volley. Sure enough, almost as soon as the final round hit the roof above them, the Cerberus troops looked over the ledge and sent their own blind and desperate shots below.

Again Ashley fired her rifle, her Revenant easily firing more rounds than the small squad above could manage to return. Now she was joined by EDI, who's smg managed much more accurate shots, hitting one of the Cerberus goons in the arm, and causing the others to retreat back once more.

"Nice shot," Ashley muttered, her eyes never leaving the ever increasingly distant ledge above. "How much further do we have to go?"

Before EDI was able to answer, the elevator came to a gradual stop next to another doorway. Once the platform had touched the ground, the doorway slid open, showing a vast room beyond its frame. A small walkway led straight to a hovering object in the center of the room, the entire floor suspended in the air by seemingly nothing at all. Gathering her wits, Ashley stood up straight and quickly moved into the room, EDI moving closely by her side. "That was almost too easy," she said, lowering her weapon as she approached a t-shaped piece of metal in the center of the vast room.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>A few hours prior aboard High Charity<strong>

Despite the holy city's crowded and small area prevented the building of any open or comfortable structures, the High Prophets' temples in the center of the city were left as an exception. A fact the Arbiter, and indeed any loyal member of the Covenant, were all too keen to never mention. It was true the Great Journey would enlighten them all, alive or dead, on a glorious path, that didn't eliminate things such as greed from polluting the minds of those still alive.

But on this day, the Arbiter was not feeling especially loyal to the supposed Prophets. He watched in horror as his kind were stripped of the title of Honor Guards, their armor and weapons being literally stripped from their hands, given instead to the nasty Jiralhanae, or Brutes as they were becoming more commonly known throughout the lower ranks, a nickname they actually encouraged.

Unfortunately, he was unable to stop any of this. Only capable of watching as his brothers walked past him, heads hung low in shame. Walking towards the end of the hallway, the sounds of a heated argument slowly grew in volume and clarity.

"We have served as your protectors since the foundation of the Covenant!" Rtas shouted at the Prophet's of Truth and Mercy, as the Arbiter walked into the large room. Vast windows could be seen above him and surrounded the room on almost all sides, showing the blackness of space. One side was illuminated by the Halo ring, and

the blue gas giant it orbited, casting a shadow over the Prophets who's backs were turned towards it.

"Recent events have made it abundantly clear that your kind can no longer guarantee our safety," Truth rebutted, his tone carrying a much more calm demeanor, as if he were more aggravated than angry of Rtas's outburst.

"If you had just giving our Phantoms more time," Rtas grumbled, hesitating as his words bordered on heresy, "his murderer was within our grasp."

"Are you questioning our judgement?"

"No," Rtas spat, "I'm merely stating..."

"Recommissioning of the guard was a drastic step, but necessary given what's transpired," Regret said, waving away Rtas with a simple motion of his arm.

You could feel the sense of hatred linger in the brief moment of silence that followed, as Rtas swallowed what was left of his pride, and gave a polite bow of his head. "I will relay your decision to the council," he said, stepping back and away from the two floating aliens. Exchanging a quick nod with the Arbiter as he passed, he made his way towards the exit as the Arbiter replaced Rtas's place in front of the Prophets.

"Politics, how tiresome," Truth muttered, rubbing his hand down his long neck and messaging it slightly. "Did you know, Arbiter, that the Sangheili have threatened to resign, over a mere exchange of hats?"

"We have always been your protectors," the Arbiter said, holding back the same disdain Rtas held with much better success.

"These are trying times, for all of us, Arbiter."

Speaking up for the first time since the Arbiter had entered the room, Mercy made a grande gesture in the air with his arms as he spoke. "Even as the Humans' annihilation filled us with satisfaction, the loss of one of the sacred rings wracked our hearts with grief," he said, gripping his chest for emphasis.

\_Ever the showman, \_the Arbiter thought to himself.

"But we renewed our faith in the prophecy," Truth continued, waving for his colleague to settle down, "that other rings would be found. And see how our faith has been rewarded." The two Prophets spun in their hovering thrones, motioning for the space structure that hovered over their heads.

"Halo," Mercy said, starting another of his short religious rants. "Its divine wind will rush through the stars, propelling all who are worthy along the path to salvation."

"But how to start this process." Truth turned his throne as he spoke, looking back down onto the Arbiter. "For ages we have searched for one who might unlock these secrets, an Oracle. And with your help, we have found one."

"With appropriate humility, we plied the Oracle with questions." Mercy started, continuing with Truth's train of thought. The two prophets differed heavily in their ways, Truth was more direct and clear, while Mercy had the unfortunate habit of making each of his words sound like a sermon altogether, a habit that only seemed to annoy those around him. None more so than Truth. "And it, with clarity and grace, has shown us the key!"

"You, Arbiter, will journey to the ring and retrieve this Sacred Icon," Truth said, making sure Mercy was given no chance to cut him off again. "And with it, we shall fulfill our promise, and begin the great journey."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Halo<strong>

The Arbiter watched as the Human woman walked into the room, followed by some sort of machine that looked vaguely of the same shape as her. He stood silently behind the Icon, his active camouflage keeping him completely hidden from view. For some inconceivable reason, he was unable to take the Icon from its hold in the air, only receiving some automated warning.

Without any another option, the Arbiter had called for reinforcements to help defend the Icon, until he was able to retrieve it. He had already fought through a dozen squads of Humans in the jungle surrounding the temple, he did not want to be overrun by a dozen more. But much to his surprise, no help had come, and instead of allies, the Arbiter found more Humans coming for the Icon. And from what he could tell by the sounds coming from the elevator, they were not aligned with the ones he fought before.

\_Patience is key here, \_he thought, as he gripped the handle of his sword. They were both completely unaware of his presence, believing they were the first to have arrived here. \_And they will continue to think they are alone. \_

Another step, and the woman was a mere hop away, across the small empty distance that separated his side of the platform from hers. Arbiter hesitated before attacking, debating on whether or not he should allow them to try and take the Icon. At best, they'd succeed and he'd take it from their corpses. At worst, they would fail and he'd be back again where he started, only with tow more bodies littering the floor.

"So I just reach out and grab it?" the woman asked the machine, keeping her eyes on the floating icon.

"Affirmative," the machine responded. "It should recognize your chromosome count and allow you to take it."

"Sounds easy enough," she said, placing her weapon on her back. Taking a careful step forward, she reached out her arm into the air, making sure not to over step the ledge.

"Careful, Lieutenant Williams," the machine called, almost sounding worried over her comrade.

"Got it," cried the woman, jumping back onto the heels of her feet and off the ledge of the walkway.

\_Impossible, how did she...\_

Unwilling to hesitate any further, he jumped across the divide, knocking the woman on her back. Standing over her, his camouflage vanished, revealing him to the pair. The machine reached up with her weapon, only to be swatted away, knocked across the walkway. Sliding across the ground, the Arbiter watched as the robot fell over the side, out of his view and worry.

"EDI," the woman cried, recovering from the initial shock. Focusing his attention back on her, the Arbiter bent over and lifted her off the ground, pulling her up by the arm that still held the Icon. Using his other hand, he reached around and ripped the weapon off of her back, throwing it off into the abyss below.

"The Icon, release it," he commanded, squeezing the thin arm beneath his comparatively massive hand. It would only be on simple kill away from taking what was rightfully his, what belonged now to the Covenant, but he still needed to know how she had managed to take the Icon while he had failed. Suddenly, a force stronger than his own ripped the woman from his grip, causing him to almost rip her arm clean off.

Stunned, the Arbiter looked to find Tartarus was now holding the Human, who had fallen unconscious from the sudden force, in the grasp of his gravity hammer. His scared and shaved face smiled at the Arbiter with a wicked grin, highlighted by the broken and protruding teeth from his lower jaw. Using one hand to hold the hammer, the Brute used the other to take the key from the woman's fingers, still tightly gripping onto the Icon, and handed it to one of the minors that stood gathered behind him. He then easily grabbed the woman and swung her over his shoulder, as if carrying nothing more than a small child.

"Tartarus!" Arbiter cursed. "The Icon was my responsibility."

"'Was' your responsibility," he spat back, "now it is mine. A bloody fate awaits you and the rest of your incompetent race. And I will lead you to it."

"So you finally show your true motives. When the Prophets learn of this betrayal, they will have your head!" the Arbiter said, attempting to give off a bigger threat than he could truly muster, only having a sword by his side.

"When they learn?" The Brute paused for a moment, lifting his hammer to aim at the Arbiter, he gave off a mighty laugh that echoed with a troublesome roar. "Fool, they ordered me to do it."

With that one mere sentence, everything the Arbiter stood for was shattered. He'd been betrayed, not just him but his entire species had been double crossed. Their entire culture and history would now mean nothing, if they could even survive the inevitable civil war. And he'd only followed their orders and watched as it happened, unwilling to do a thing until it was far too late now. Death started at him in the form of a hammer.



A blue light of energy formed on the tip of Tartarus's hammer, growing in size until it became almost too much to look at directly. After a moment, it shot across the air and hit the Arbiter directly in the chest, sending him flying across the floor and over the ledge, all in a mere instant after the final threat Tartarus gave. Now the black abyss from below was all he could see, and the Arbiter braced himself for the inevitable execution he had managed to stave off for this long.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>Okay so, back on a roll/schedule to go. Thanks for the reviews for last chapter, there was only one complaint and that was about Shep standing toe to toe with a Hunter. Truth be told, I didn't give it that much thought when I originally wrote it, but looking back I can probably go and edit that a bit to make it more realistic. But I am so happy that was the only thing ya'll had to complain about! I'm calling that a win!

Story news, so I still need to know what you folks do and don't like about it, so please feel free to share your opinions. I know folks on the internet love sharing their opinion. And there's a poll on my profile regarding the Elites, so if you want to affect the cannon of this story, please go take a look.

And an update as to where the other major choices are standing as of now.

Romance is Liara

>Genophage is cured<br>Geth and Quarrians make peace

>Rachni Queen is saved<p>

And I honestly can't think of anything else that really matters choice wise in game. So looks like this will be the last poll! I'll take it down when I start the next chapter, so go and vote. Unless there's something I'm forgetting, in which case go tell me already!

And as always, thanks for reading.

## 28. Crypt Keeper

**\*\*Crypt Keeper\*\***

**\*\*Somewhere on Halo\*\***

A cold damp draft sent shivers down Shepard's spine, causing him to stir in his somewhat uncomfortable rest. Everything came into focus slowly, then it rushed in suddenly all at once. He could feel a throbbing pain in his skull, a bruise that seemed to vibrate with every beat of his heart, only dulled by the aches of pain shooting through the rest of his body. Everything hurt, the pain made worse by the cramped position of his limbs.

Wiggling a little in place, Shepard found himself bound by a greasy vine-like tentacle. Wrapped around his body, it tightened itself around his torso and legs, pinning his arms together. Looking down, Shepard found that this tentacle had him held in the air, the floor being no where in sight, trapped in some sort of cavern, the only

light coming from a few artificial installations along the walls.

And from the shadows, protected from sight by an almost unnatural darkness, something approached. A massive plant like monster appeared, covered in the same disgusting puss and dying flesh that Shepard had seen on other Flood forms. Unlike the small parasites he had fought before, this creature was huge, taking up almost the entire room of the cavern. Its head, if one could call it that, resembled that of a budding flower, but only in shape. If anything, it was a flower that had decayed to the point of resembling a zombie that had somehow managed to grow teeth.

"What the hell are you?" Shepard asked, more disgusted than he was afraid. This wasn't the first alien he'd met that was bigger than him, and it wouldn't be the last.

"I?" it spoke, the walls of its 'mouth' moving in a way that resembled speech, but never matched up to the words he was saying. "I am a monument to all your sins."

Suddenly, Shepard's attention was drawn away from the creature, distracted by two more bodies being carried in by more tentacle vines. One was larger than the other, struggling against the strength of the monster. The other was far smaller, but non the less just as eager to escape. He recognized the smaller one as EDI, her metallic body reflecting what little light shined through the thick fog in the air.

"EDI!" he shouted, hoping to get her attention.

"Shepard?!" she responded, even her normally calm voice coming across as confused and surprised.

"Demons!" the third body shouted, still desperately trying to break free. Shepard recognized it now as one of the Elites, the familiar outline of his body was still partially obscured by darkness and fog. Only this one was different from the others Shepard had fought, his armor looked far more older than the others, appearing more along the lines of medieval chain mail than space weaponry.

"Shepard, I've lost contact with the Normandy. This thing is blocking all of my communications," EDI said, ignoring the Elite entirely. Her synthetic voice came across as panicked now, growing increasingly worried as the situation seemed to worsen.

Shepard felt himself jerked forward, dragged closer to the creature's opening, as if being inspected by some unseen eyes.

"This one is nerve and orders, and has its mind concluded," it said, breathing off a smell more rancid than burning flesh. Being pushed back, Shepard watched as the Elite was moved forward now, the creature moving them around like nothing more than the toys of a child. "This one is but flesh and faith, and is the more deluded. And this one." Now it was EDI who was pulled forth, her body being turned and twirled, so that the Gravemind could better examine her. "And this one is machine and questions, and is the more terrified of the three."

"Kill me, or release me, parasite!" the Elite shouted, obviously not

intent to listen. "But do not waste my time with talk."

"There is much talk," it continued, ignoring the alien's threat. "And I have listened. Through rock and metal and time. Now I shall talk, and you shall listen."

Again, more arms appeared from below, carrying with them sights yet still more horrifying than the last. A small metal eye like machine, warped by time and damage. It appeared along with another creature, infused into the tentacle like some kind of sick decaying tumor. The tumor had the vague appearance of the alien Prophet Shepard was sure he'd not just recently killed.

"Greetings," the eye called, oddly chipper for its current state. "I am 2401 Penitent Tangent, monitor of installation 05."

The tumor now moved, twitching in a disgusting unnatural way. "And I am the Prophet of Regret!" The Prophet, or what was left of him, struggled to form words, the mere act of speaking seeming to pain him more than was bearable. "Council most high... Hierarchy of the Covenant!"

Tangent took little notice of his trapped comrade, instead it focused its sole attention on Shepard, having noticed the Human across the way from him. "A Reclaimer? Here? At last!" It shouted, hovering over towards Shepard. Still tied to the tentacle, the eye dragged it along, appearing like a sentient balloon was running away from its child. "We have much to do," it continued. "This facility must be activated if we are to control this outbreak!"

"Stay where you are!" the Prophet interrupted. "Nothing can be done until my sermon is complete," he shouted, obviously delusion, if the Prophet was even still there at all.

"Not true," the machine retorted, flying back over to the alien tumor. "This installation has a successful utilization record of 1.2 trillion simulated, and one actual. It is ready to fire on demand."

"Arbiter," the Prophet said, turning to the Elite. "Of all the objects our Lords left behind, none are so worthless as these Oracles! They know nothing of the Great Journey."

"And you know nothing about containment! You have disregarded even the need for the most basic of protocols!"

The Gravemind moved its two captors apart, bringing back down to the darkness below, an act made sickening by the desperate screams of the Prophet.

"This one's containment, and this one's Great Journey, are the same," it said to the three other held captors. "Your Prophets have promised you freedom from a doomed existence. But you will find no salvation on this ring." Shepard watched as the Elite ceased his struggling, now listening intently on the parasite's words. Though if he listened because of anger or curiosity, Shepard couldn't tell. "Those that built this place, knew what they wrought. Do not mistake their intent, or all will perish as they did before."

"It's right," Shepard said, seeing an opportunity to reach the

Elite's rationality. "This Halo is a weapon, your leaders are going to make a mistake that'll wipe out all life in the galaxy."

"Your ignorance already destroyed one of the sacred rings, Shepard. It shall not harm another," the Arbiter said, still unable to cope with the truth of the matter.

\_So much for rationale, \_Shepard thought. \_Though apparently my reputation does exceed me.\_

"If you will not hear the truth," the Gravemind continued, interrupting Shepard's train of thought, "then I will show it to you. There is still time to stop the key from turning, but it must first be found." Again Shepard was brought closer to the monster's mouth, this time it brought EDI with him, his head jerking from the sudden stop and go of the tentacles. "You two will search one likely spot." Now the Arbiter was brought closer, joining this bizarre meeting of allies. "And you will search another. Fate had us meet as foes, but this ring will make us brothers!"

That was all Shepard heard before he felt the tentacle start to throw him back, accelerating suddenly until all motion just as quickly vanished, instead replaced with a blinding white flash and a sudden change in atmosphere.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>Short, yes very short I know. But the chapter needed to end there otherwise I'd have to make it like 6k long again. And the longer the chapter the more mistakes I make.

But I'm pushing ahead! Giving the poll on my profile one more update before I switch it for the final poll that will last until the very final chapter (ish). So please do go and vote. The final poll will mainly affect the sequel (Which I've already started. Go check it out, it's called "Diamond in the Rough," and I'm very proud of it ^.^)

As always, thanks for reading!

## 29. Hey You

\*\*Ch 29\*\*

\*\*Hey You\*\*

\*\*High Charity\*\*

Again the world came into a weird new existence for Shepard, as the sight of a filthy cave with a monster in its depths, was replaced with neat and clean floors and walls. The entire room shown with a kind of technological brilliance, with amazing pillars of metal folded into layers in a fantastic geometric design. The bright purples of the large room are what really managed to shine through, standing out against any architecture Shepard had seen from any civilization. Of course, the view of the room was quickly ruined by the dozens of hostile aliens standing in it.

Specifically, it was two aliens in the center of the small crowd that

caught Shepard's attention. Two more of the Prophets, their ugly and loose skinned bodies were supported by their signature floating thrones, were in the middle of some type of sermon, the specifics of which Shepard was unable to determine. It wasn't a second before the yellow light that transported him there vanished, alerting a small Grunt to his presence.

"Hi, I'm Commander Shepard," he started sarcastically as the Grunt looked up in fear, only to be interrupted by a squeal of terror. Panicked, the alien threw up its arms, tossing the small weapon it carried, and ran off into the crowd.

Grabbing the weapon, Shepard ducked into cover behind one of the pillars, all in one swift motion.

Looking around the side, he found that the Prophets were being quickly surrounded by the much more physically impressive Brutes. As one of them yelled out, "Kill the False Shepard," the pair of aliens descended into the floor, carried away to safety by an elevator.

"Shepard, behind you!" a female voice shouted, causing Shepard to instinctively look to his side. A Grunt had managed to sneak up on him, but was immediately greeted with a face full of plasma as Shepard melted half of his head and chest. Looking back to origin of the voice, Shepard found EDI taking up position behind the pillar opposite his own.

"EDI?" he shouted over the increasing plasma fire. "When did you get here?"

He watched as the machine ducked out of cover, firing a weapon on the aliens. Returning to the safety of the pillar, EDI shouted back, "I was teleported here with you. Weren't you paying attention?"

"Sorry, still trying to get over that thing," he responded, taking pot shots at a few of the Grunts that had ventured closer. "It had freaking teeth!"

"Haven't you dealt with something similar before? The Thorian if I recall," EDI responded, moving only her arm out of cover to expertly fire on the encroaching grunts.

"The Thorian didn't have freaking zombies in its arms. How am I supposed to sleep after that?" Shepard continued, allowing his plasma pistol to cool.

"I'd be more concerned on how the Covenant seems to know your name."

Leaning out of cover once again, Shepard was stopped by the presence of a Brute that had managed to charge up close to him. Expecting for the massive alien to swat him away, Shepard was surprised when the Brute reeled back in pain, having been hit by one of EDI's overloads. Taking advantage of the surprise attack, Shepard blasted the alien from point blank range, burning away chest hair and skin, melting the Brute's chest away. Turning back behind the pillar, Shepard continued on as if nothing life threatening had just occurred.

"I don't know, maybe they found my fan club. I am the most famous

Human in the galaxy," he said sarcastically.

"You can't possibly expect that to be true!" EDI scoffed. Taking a quick moment to check her surroundings, Shepard watched as she sprinted away from her side of the room towards his, keeping her head low and her back bent almost parallel to the ground as she quickly approached.

"That was a joke, EDI," Shepard responded, as the AI reached the safety of his pillar. "You're normally on top of those."

"Sorry, I'm still having trouble reconnecting to the \_Normandy,\_" she said in an increasingly worried voice.

Growing troubled himself, Shepard focused his attention away from the enemy fire and on his squad-mate. "Why can't you connect? And how are you still running this body if you aren't connected to the ship?"

"I left a sub-routine in charge of the \_Normandy,\_" that way I didn't have to split my processing power on this and the ship." As she spoke, EDI had leaned out of cover and knelt down on the floor, easily dropping another pair of Grunts. Meanwhile, Shepard stood above her, firing on the larger Brutes, who were growing increasingly reckless as the firefight drew on. Out of the corner of his eye, Shepard watched as one of the Grunts threw a plasma grenade. It completely missed the pair, but managed to stick itself neatly on the pillar.

The duo leaned back into cover, cowering close as the explosion rocked their shields. The grenade didn't manage to harm them, but the pillar was another story. Having been blasted and melted to at the base by plasma fire, the following explosion managed to seal the nail in the coffin, causing the entire thing to shift and fall. Sensing the weakening of the pillar, Shepard and EDI dived forward as the entire thing fell straight to the ground, pulling with it a few chunks of metal off the roof. Twisting in place, Shepard watched as the pillar fell to its side, splitting the room in half between them and the aliens, who had all jumped back to avoid the damage.

Recovering quickly, Shepard sprinted back to pillar, now at a complete stop on the floor, crouching low to use it as further cover. Joining him, EDI picked up another plasma rifle, firing off a few shots before ducking behind the wall. "What's the plan here then EDI?" Shepard asked, jumping up to return fire on the now panicking Grunts.

"I don't know!" she said, practically screaming. If she had been organic, Shepard could swear she'd be having a panic attack at this very moment.

By now, only a pair of Grunts remained alive, or at least capable of still fighting. Shepard chuckled as the two aliens threw their arms up and ran screaming out of the massive room, like frightened children from the boogie man. "Alright then, works for me," he said, placing the weapon on a magnetic clip on his belt. Looking down, he noticed EDI was still crouched, her robotic eyes giving off a completely blank stare. It was only now that Shepard realized the holographic visor she normally had was no longer activated.

"EDI, what's going on?"

Blinking, the machine stood up. "I'm trying to reconnect to the ship and access the city's systems as well. I'm having trouble doing both. I'm sorry Shepard, this should not be happening. That thing did something to me while we were connected."

"Let's back up a bit then. Start with what it did to you. How can an organic interact with a synthetic like that?"

It was only now that EDI looked directly at Shepard with her eyes, he noticed they had been completely still before. "Cerberus had been experimenting with a similar way to connect a organic mind to a synthetic's. Project Overlord, if you recall?"

"You can spare me the details, EDI. I remember that one, I also remember that was a billion credit research facility with some of the smartest Cerberus had, and it didn't work as they had hoped. And they weren't, ya know, a giant plant zombie thing!"

"It must have found some Forerunner technology, or be of an artificial creation. All I can recall is it managed to reach inside my mind." She sounded almost on the verge of tears. "I was scared, Shepard. I was afraid it would find its way to Earth or to you, or Jeff."

Placing his hand on EDI's shoulder, Shepard tried his best to console the machine. He wasn't too familiar with the inner workings of an AI's emotions, but he knew a soldier on the brink of collapse, and that he could handle. "It's alright. You're not used to experiencing fear, but it's a good thing. Helps us organics keep out of trouble. But I need you to keep focused on the now. Let's start on where we are exactly. Are we still on Halo?"

Rolling his hand off of her shoulder, EDI managed to calm herself down to her usual self. "No, not exactly. The Gravemind managed to transport us the High Charity, the Covenant's capital."

"It managed to transport us out of the system?"

"No," EDI said, shaking her head in the negative. "High Charity is a massive space station, carved from the husk of an asteroid, we're in orbit above the planet near the ring."

Recalling the massive fleet Shepard had seen, just before being blasted into the water and dragged away by the Gravemind, he could recall a structure not unlike that of Omega.

"So like Omega then?"

"Only on a much grander scale. This city is capable of FTL trips and exist as the home for the entire San 'Shyuum, the Prophets and leaders of the Covenant."

"So a lot bigger than Omega," Shepard responded, shrugging. "Alright, so why did big ugly send us here?"

EDI started walking towards the exit, leading Shepard to the door. Stopping at a console just in front of their escape, she activated a holographic interface, before answering his question. "The Gravemind

does not want Halo to be activated."

"That makes both of us. Only, I don't plan to make his corpse into lunch."

"Precisely why we shouldn't trust it, but it appears that the Prophets have the activation Index and plan to use. I'm attempting to track them through the city..." She stopped suddenly, sending a chill down Shepard's spine. "Shepard, I'm receiving reports that the Flood have infected the city, and that the Brutes have been given orders to exterminate the Elites. There's one more thing, the Covenant ground forces are reporting a large force of Humans are attempting to seize control of some of Halo's key structures. They're going by the name of Cerberus."

"Great, so that's what? The Flood, the Covenant, and Cerberus we have to deal with now, and there's still the possibility of running into a few Reapers while we're here. Did you say they were exterminating the Elites?"

"It would appear the Prophet of Truth is attempting to exterminate their presence in the military and replace them with the Brutes," she answered coldly. "Perhaps we can play this to our advantage."

"Enemy of my enemy I suppose," Shepard shrugged. "But come on then, we better focus on stopping that Prophet."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Surface of Halo<strong>

For the Arbiter, the sudden change in his world view, both figuratively and literally with his teleportation, left him in a state of turmoil. He'd been betrayed, left for dead by the very men he had worshiped. Instead of salvation, he now faced death, him and his entire people. The parasite, the Gravemind, it had given him a second chance. A new purpose to replace the religious zeal that had been dashed away with Tartarus's betrayal.

It took a moment for this new reality to set in. Instead of a cold damp cave, Thel found himself laying on a hillside, a peaceful breeze cooling him, reaching into the joints of his armor to provide a desperately needed fresh air. In another world, he might have stayed like that, resting on the ground as the world spun around him, visions of home dancing around in his head. But this was not home, and this was not his world.

Standing straight, Thel pushed away the thoughts of tranquility, instead focusing on his new task ahead.

\_What ever the truth may be, \_he thought to himself, \_one thing is for certain. Truth has betrayed me, and for that he will pay with his life. \_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>Blah blah blah, stuff happened. Please do share with me your thoughts in a review! I do appreciate every bit of support. And I will finish this story before I leave for basic! This I swear!



As always, thanks for reading =)

And a heads up. Last poll is now closed. New poll is going up to determine the ending (Which is obviously going to be super different than the ending of either series) It mainly pertains to the Mass Effect decisions and have the highest impact on the sequel, (which is currently started go check it out) so I highly recommend checking it out =D This will be the last poll for major world changing decisions. So if you want a hand in the cannon lore of this story, I implore you to check my profile and vote!

### 30. Out There all Alone

**\*\*Ch 30\*\***

**\*\*Out There all Alone\*\***

**\*\*High Charity\*\***

Through the massive gates of the High Prophets' temple, Shepard and EDI charged out. They had fought through room after room of aliens, finally taking their first steps outside of the temple into the massive city itself. Now they stood on a landing pad, EDI sealing the door behind them.

"I know we're basically in a hornet's nest, but how many aliens can they possibly have here," Shepard mumbled, between deep shallow breaths. He bent over and caught himself on his knees, trying to regain control of his breathing.

Turning away from the door, EDI raised her pistol and continued walking. "Shepard, I have a life sign on the other side of the platform," she said, advancing slowly. Following close behind, Shepard walked slowly as a shape grew steadily into view. A small huddled mass sat on the far end of the pad, twitching its arms and limbs sporadically.

"What the hell is that?" Shepard grumbled, lowering his weapon as they approached.

His question was answered by the mass itself, as it turned slowly to show its face and front, revealing the Prophet of Mercy. The old San 'Shyuum grabbed at a monstrous creature that dug itself at his chest, struggling against a small infection Flood form. Despite his pain and displeasure, he still managed to give a look of disgust to the pair standing above him.

It was EDI who spoke to him first, a surprising surge of anger coming across in her voice. "The other Prophet, Truth, where has he gone!"

"Back to Earth, to finish what we started," he spat back, quickly losing his grasp to life.

Unwilling to watch the grotesque sight, Shepard knelt down next to the dying alien man. Gripping the Flood tight, he ripped it off of the Prophet, causing both to die almost instantly. Tossing the parasite aside, he stood back up to find EDI looking off into the

center of the city.

"Shepard," she said spinning to face him, "There's nothing we can do to stop Truth now, but there's a way we can destroy this city and prevent the Flood from spreading."

Looking out into the skyline, Shepard weighed her words. He could still hear the sounds of plasma fire and screams from below. Fire and smoke rose up to make his eyes water slightly. Small explosions in the distance rocked the very ground he stood on. Three different factions now fought for control of the space station. The remaining Elites fought back against their former allies, as the Covenant attempted to eradicate them and the spreading Flood. And from the looks of it, the Covenant was starting to leave everything and everyone behind.

"Isn't there a chance we could somehow evacuate the population?" Shepard asked, not knowing exactly how to proceed. "Destroying this city means killing I don't know how many bystanders in the way."

"Not to mention it would doom Truth's species to extinction," EDI interjected, causing Shepard to scowl. "Shepard, the city's going to be over run. Any formal military the Covenant had left is now in shambles and retreating. Anyone left behind will become food for the Flood. There's nothing we can do."

"This is not how I wanted to end the day," he scoffed. "What do we have to do then?"

"Luckily for us, not much," she said, pointing to a crashed frigate in the distance. "The Flood have been crashing captured ships into the city. Most of them still have their FTL drives intact. Using what we learned from the first Halo, I've been able to make a wireless link with that ship's systems. I'd rather not risk the chance of a remote detonation, but all we need now is a means to escape."

Nodding in acknowledgement, Shepard turned back towards the door to the temple. He was stopped suddenly as the ground beneath him shook violently. Looking into the center of the city, the pair found the source of the sudden disturbance. A massive gray ship was beginning to lift into the skyline of the city, rising ever higher into the rock of the asteroid above it, aiming towards a hole in the rock's surface.

"There goes our ticket back home."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Surface of Halo<strong>

The Arbiter had seen enough death for one lifetime. Too many of his brothers and kin died on this day, a fact he would not soon forget. Traveling through the interlocking passages of the Halo ring, the Arbiter found many warriors slaughtered, by Flood, Humans, and his former allies. Revenge was the sole idea on the warriors increasingly distraught mind. Now was not the time to dwell on the dead, but to honor them.

Thel passed through another room littered with dead Sangheili and Jiralhanae, all with varying degrees of plasma burns. Truth wanted to be absolute in his decision to remove the Arbiter's kind from the Covenant, and ordered that every Sangheili warrior and councilman be eliminated immediately. Thel had managed to find a weapon and transmitter, and from communications between the Brutes and Tartarus, the atrocities committed became clear.

The High Prophet of Truth gave an order to all Jiralhanae, kill the Sangheili and take their positions in the Covenant Military. Immediately entire squads of Elites were wiped out, shot in the back by cowards waiting in ambush. Several Unnogy and Megalekgolo were killed as well, with most of the survivors taking up arms in defense of their superiors. In the coming war, the Sangheili could at least count on some allies.

The vast majority of ships in orbit were now being controlled by Jiralhanae crew, a decision that now made sense given the Truth's long term plans. Being outnumbered and out gunned, the Sangheili controlled ships fought tooth and nail for control of the space above Halo, and for a while, they managed to hold their own against the overwhelming force. However, the Forerunner ship that powered High Charity destroyed half of the remaining fleet as it fled the system. Faced with certain defeat in space, the remaining Ship Masters ordered their crew to evacuate to the surface of the ring, knowing the Brutes would be unable to wipe them out from orbit, the Sangheili now hoped to start a ground offensive and regroup.

Rushing into another room, Thel was surprised to see a group of Sangheili and Unngoy still alive.

"Arbiter," the lead Ultra said surprised, "We thought you were dead. The Brutes are rebelling against us!"

"Not the Brutes. Truth has ordered this insurrection and plans to kill us all," Thel explained calmly. "Gather your warriors. There is work to be done," he finished, turning away from the squad.

"Rtas, are you still with me?" Thel said into his communicator.

"I hear you Arbiter, but you must hurry. We can not hold this position for long," \_Rtas responded, barely coming in through the static.

"I shall be there soon, and with reinforcements," he said, referring to his new entourage. Turning back to the squad, he shouted, "Quickly, we must move if we are to survive this co, fming battle."

The newly formed squad sprinted out of the room, with Thel leading his new underlings. Quickly the sprinted through the structure, barely stopping to slay the few Jiralhanae they passed. Surprise, and now numbers, working greatly to their advantage. They only slowed down periodacilly to allow the smaller Unngoy a chance to catch up. With their speed and haste, the group managed to make it back outside into the rocky terrain.

"Arbiter, where are we headed?" the Ultra asked, unsure of his superior's mission.

"Rtas Vadum holds a position on the other side of this canyon, we must find a way..." Thel started, before something massive drew away the entire groups attention. From beneath them in the canyon below, a Covenant Scarab gave an audible howl as it started to elevate on its legs and rise up, its metallic "head" turning to look at the group.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Surface of Halo<strong>

"So uh, should we shoot them or..." James started, hold the Scarab weapon controls in his hand.

"Don't shoot anybody!" Liara shouted back, struggling to maintain control of the foreign machine. "If you haven't noticed, there are much bigger threats than them right now."

"I don't know," James shrugged, "that lead one's wearing something weird. He might be important somehow."

"Cerberus fighters on the right," Liara shouted. Without hesitation, James activated the Scarab's cannon, firing on the small ships just as their rounds started to hit them. Waiting for the smoke to clear, he turned the weapon back on the group of aliens, who looked surprisingly calm for the position they were in.

"Liara, activate the external comms," James ordered.

Looking towards her counter part, Liara stared at him blankly. "What could you possibly hope to achieve," she questioned, flipping a switch she hoped would be the right one. A quiet buzz was heard throughout their cabin, alerting them that whatever was said inside would be echoed into the outside world.

"Listen up ugly's," James said, raising his voice to be heard. "You don't like us, and I sure as hell don't like you. But that Prophet's going to kill every last one of us, unless we can get to him. One of you needs to get in that Banshee, and the others need to hop on to give us some cover fire."

The group stared in wonder, followed by anger, mixed with a small degree of amusement from the lead Elite. Turning to his squad, James watched as he pointed to their Scarab and started barking orders, before turning around himself and headed towards the Banshee they had passed by the door. Fiddling with the controls, Liara maneuvered the massive tank to the side, lowering the deck to be level with the side of the canyon wall, allowing the squad of Elites and Grunts to jump directly onto the Scarab's back. They both heard the the shuffling of feet above them, as metallic armor scuffed across the metal tank.

One of the Elites, who adorned white armor, fell down into the Scarab's cockpit, causing both Liara and James to jump at his presence. Turning towards James, the alien spoke. "The Arbiter will give us support from the air. We'll ensure nothing else attempts to stop us." There was a slight delay in what the Elite's words to his mouth moving, as James's translator processed the language.

"Uh thanks," James stammered, as the Ultra turned around and headed

back towards the roof.

"This is... weird," Liara muttered.

"Yeah," James agreed, turning back to his station. "Joker, you read me?" he asked into his radio.

\_"Loud and clear. How's the new toy?"\_

"Mean and purple," James joked. "Do you still have Ash's life signs?"

\_"EDI's still acting up, but yeah. She's in the control room in the center of the lake. Hope that thing has a big enough gun to blow a new door."\_

"Good call on grabbing it, Covenant's too busy shooting their own guys and dealing with Cerberus and the Flood," James said.

"I doubt they'll miss it," Liara joked, starting the massive machine up and beginning the trek through the canyon. "Any word on Shepard?"

\_"There's still some reports coming in from the Covenant's channel. He's definitely alive and on that rock-space-station-thing. If anyone's able to find a way back, it be him," \_Joker said through the static. \_"Watch out though. Scan's showing Reaper forces ahead, they're having it out with the Elites."\_

"Roger that," Liara responded, "Take care to stay out of sight Jeff, we'll call you when we need you." With that, Liara and James turned off their radio's, instead switching to the Scarab's communication system. "Arbiter is it then?" she said, contacting the Banshee that now flew closely above them. "If anything tries to attack us, it isn't friendly to either of our sides. So take them down quick." Again she turned off the radio, not caring to hear the alien's response.

"It's been a very weird day," James said with a sigh.

"Agreed."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>You thought me dead! You thought me gone and forgotten! Well sucks for you to be thinking! I got's me groove back and really wanna finish this thing and write some really weird fiction in the next story!

In reality though, sorry for the lack of updates. Kind of had boot camp and what not, Uncle Sam doesn't really like us using computers during training. I couldn't even look up porn. I had to go like months and I just now got my computer. So, like it or not, I'm finishing this story. Please do criticize me as much as you'd like in a review!

And as always, thanks for reading

**\*\*Ch 31\*\***

**\*\*Through the Ring of Fire\*\***

**\*\*High Charity\*\***

"I'm getting real tired of these freaking apes, on this freaking station," Shepard cursed, taking cover from yet another squad of Brutes. He and EDI had traveled through a seemingly endless amount of hallways and passages on their way to a hanger. And with every corner they turned, a new threat awaited. The pair now huddled close to each other behind a purple crate that shook and trembled when the aliens fired on them, the unstable structure providing their only source of protection in the cramped hallway.

"How much further, EDI?" Shepard asked, while grabbing a plasma grenade and handing it to her. With mechanical precision, EDI activated the grenade and threw it down the hall, revealing only her arm from the relative safety of the crate.

"Behind this next turn," she answered, pushing away from cover and further down the hall. Following, Shepard was careful to step over the burnt corpses, picking up a grenade or two as he passed.

Again they continued through the passageway, Shepard being barely able to tell it apart from the one prior, the purple colored walls all bent and curved in the same angular design as the last. It became almost hypnotic, the dimly lit lights casting fantastic shadows across the floor and wall, creating an awe inspiring presence as Shepard sprinted down the hall.

"We should be almo..." EDI started, before a massive howl interrupted her. The howl echoed through the hall, reverberating across the floor and walls, causing the pair to stop dead in their tracks. Following the noise, the lights flickered, before turning off entirely, leaving the duo in complete darkness.

"EDI," Shepard started, unsure of what to ask first.

"The power was directly linked to the Forerunner ship," she started, answering in an almost routine manner. "It was only a matter of time before the city started redirecting power to more critical systems."

"I wasn't going to ask about the lights." Activating his omni-tool's flashlight, Shepard shined it around the hallway, stopping in the direction they were walking from. "What was that noise."

"I..." EDI started, hesitating ever so slightly, "I don't know."

It sounded again, the vicious blood curdling howl that made the very ground shake. This time it came louder than before, and somehow even angrier. Slowly, something started to show itself to Shepard and EDI, crawling slowly into the Shepard's light from the blackness just beyond it. It started at a snail's pace, then, seeming to notice there was something watching it, the small mass gained speed. The single blob became clearly visible, a hideous puss filled sack on spindly little legs, with three outstretched brush like arms.

The single Flood form was quickly followed by another, and then another. More came behind that, until the floor and walls seemed to be moving in the shadows beyond the light.

"Move," Shepard shouted, turning quickly on his heels and continuing down the hall, EDI close behind. His light danced around the path, providing barely enough illumination to prevent him from tripping over his own feet. It moved rhythmically with the motion of his arm, illuminating the floor, and then the wall for but a brief moment, before again returning to guide the pair on their path. With each quick reveal of the wall, less and less of the purple was visible, now being quickly covered by the massive horde of puss like creatures.

"There's the door, up ahead!" EDI shouted, trying to be heard above the now deafening sound of spider like legs against metal, coupled with the almost sickening hiss of the monsters behind them.

True to her word, before the pair appeared a door, much larger in scale than the ones they had passed before. And unlike the doors from before, which would open upon their approach with an almost rhythmic chime and rush of air, this one remained firmly shut. Shepard and EDI exchanged looks of worry, before instinct put them both to work.

Turning around, Shepard dropped to a knee and fired off three quick plasma rounds from his pistol, all in a single quick movement. EDI jumped behind him, firmly planting her legs into the metal, she searched the smooth surface of the metal for a crevice or crack, something she could leverage and push against. Finding the crease in the door that allowed it to slide into the floor, she shoved her hands into it, bending the purple metal out of place. Gripping it tightly, she started to pull up, providing a slight sliver of light.

Shepard fired another round of plasma, causing another group of the small creatures to explode. Another pull of the trigger, another layer of ash and flesh fell to the ground, only to be replaced by another of amorphous blob.

"Hallway's getting crowded here EDI," Shepard said, firing another round into the mass of flesh and puss. Another howl was heard, deafening even over the chaos in the hall. This time it was even closer than before, causing the small Flood forms to scatter. A shadow smashed through them, pushing itself into the Shepard's view, pushing aside all of the smaller masses of dead flesh in its path. It stood before Shepard, shoulders hunched to fit into the small space of the hall. "Hallway's getting very crowded!"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Halo<strong>

Another aircraft zoomed towards the Scarab, now stopped dead in its tracks by a pair of Wraith tanks below.

\_"Hey Arbiter guy,"\_ a deep voice came through Thel's communicator. \_"We got too many targets to shoot at. Keep Cerberus off of us, we'll kill the monkeys."\_

Thel's only response was that of blaster fire, as he shot down the orange craft. In the fire that followed, another craft appeared, banking to its right to avoid the Arbiter's line of fire. Following the enemy fighter, Thel Banked left, trailing behind and firing another round of plasma. Barely missing, he fired again, as the his Banshee quickly closed the distance between them. Again the Human fighter dodged his fire, and again Thel banked to follow, the pair circling around the Scarab as it fired to the ground below.

Not willing to be outdone, Thel increased his speed, almost ramming the fighter with the front of his ship. Before the Cerberus pilot could react, Thel managed to fire a fuel rod bomb, while simultaneously pulling his craft up. In all, he managed to preform the boost and evasive maneuver in a quick sequence, destroying the Cerberus fighter.

\_"We're moving on,"\_ the voice said again, \_"Go ahead up to structure, we'll make you a door."\_

The Arbiter boosted his engines forward in acknowledgement, headed out over the water that the canyon emptied into. He made sure to stay clear of the Scarab's line of sight as it charged and fired its weapon on the front structure's wall. With a deafening roar, the cannon fired and burst through the structure with little resistance.

"Rtas," Thel said into his communicator.

\_"I hear you, Arbiter."\_

"Gather what forces you can, we're going after Tartarus."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Halo Control Room<strong>

A massive hand gripped Ashley's back, pushing her onto the console. Its owner, a ghastly looking Brute with a twisted snarl, pinned her against the holographic display, slamming his free hand into the controls to intimidate her.

"I will not tell you again," he grumbled, "Take the icon and activate the ring!"

"Yeah, sorry ugly but I don't do this whole 'damsel in distress' thing," she responded, gritting her teeth against the massive weight pressed against her back. Struggling, Ashley managed to glance at her surroundings, a task proving difficult with the alien blocking her view. However, she manage to find three other Brutes filled the room, providing their leader with an entourage. It wasn't the Covenant that worried her, but instead the Reaper Cannibals that stood behind the Brutes, silently watching everything that went on. With an unwavering presence, the Cannibals remained almost motionless, with some kind of water and oil mixture slowly dripping from their wide open mouths.

"What's the matter, your boss doesn't think you monkey's can do the job on your own?" Ashley mocked, "Got to outsource to the Reapers?"



Pulling her away from the console, Tartarus held Ashley aloft with one hand, gripping her tightly around her shoulders and neck. "The Prophet," he spat back, "view them as necessary. I tolerate their presence, just as I tolerate yours. But my tolerance of you, Human, is growing thin!" Again he slammed her back on the console, and again he slammed his fist into it, this time with the activation index protruding from his sausage like fingers.

"What, can't do it yourself?" Ashley said sarcastically, chuckling ever so slightly. The mere act of talking proved difficult, with almost the Brute attempting to push all 500 kilos of his weight onto her. "Maybe you should try asking a bit nicer."

This time Tartarus did not pull her up, but instead lowered himself to her level, bending over at the waist to engulf her entire field of view. A look of anger clearly dominated his face, his snarl only helping to distort his twisted alien features more to Ashley.

"You test your luck, Hum..." Before being able to finish, Ashley spat in the Brute's face, causing him to flinch back. Growling, he reached his free hand back, preparing to strike Ashley as hard as he could, without killing her.

"Careful," came another, more mechanical voice. "This Reclaimer is delicate!" It was the Monitor, trapped by the grasp of one of the Brutes behind them.

"One more word Oracle," Tartarus cursed, turning slightly to face the machine, "And I'll rip your eye from its socket!" His threat came followed by a growl of anger, at both the Monitor and towards Ashley. "Which is nothing compared to what I'll do to you," he said, turning back towards Ashley.

Another presence entered the room, one that carried with a noble power to it. "Tartarus," it said, causing the Brute to grow visibly shaken.

"Impossible," he spat, turning his full body towards the entrance of the chamber, still gripping Ashley tightly in his hand. There, standing before them all, was a tall alien in almost medieval looking armor. He was skinnier than the Brutes, and from what Ashley could tell, had far less hair than them. He was an Elite, as James would call them, but this one seemed different to the others she'd fought before. Whatever the reason for him being there, Ashley only saw another threat for her to eliminate.

"Put down the Icon," he commanded.

"Put it down?! And disobey the Hierarchs?" As Tartarus spoke, he twisted his arm, dragging Ashley along with him, like she was nothing more than a rag doll to him.

"There are things about Halo even the Hierarchs do not understand," the Elite said calmly.

"Take care, Arbiter," Tartarus spat, waving for his lackeys to heel as the Arbiter's words enraged them. "What you say is heresy."

He shrugged, "Is it? Oracle, what is Halo's purpose?"

Now it was the Monitor's turn to talk, but before it could barely utter a word, Tartarus threw Ashley to the side, grabbing the machine from the arms of the other Brute. "Not another word of this nonsense!"

"Please," came another voice, this one carrying a small feeling of familiarity to Ashley, "don't shake the light bulb." Turning up from the floor where she fell, Ashley watched as James and Liara strolled in, weapons drawn and pointed at the Brutes. Following them came more Elites, and then the smaller Grunts, all taking positions behind and around the Arbiter. Their presence caused the Brutes to grow in anger, taking a step or two forward towards their new threat. "Unless you want to see what the inside of your head looks like, I'd tell your boys to chill," James said, keeping his weapon steady. Turning towards the Arbiter, he continued, "Go ahead do your whole Arbiter thing, or whatever its called."

"The sacred rings, what are they?" the Elite asked, continuing with his previous question.

"Weapons of last resort," the monitor started, still in the grasp of Tartarus. "They were built to eliminate all potential Flood hosts, thereby rendering the parasite harmless."

"And those who made the rings?" the Arbiter continued, "What happened to the Forerunners?"

"After exhausting every available strategic option, my creators activated the rings. They, and all additional sentient life in three radii of the galactic center died... as planned." The Arbiter bowed his head low, carrying it in an almost shameful manner. "Would you like to see the relevant data?"

"Tartarus," the Elite started, almost as if he himself were already defeated, "the Prophets have betrayed us."

Throwing the machine at the group, Tartarus grabbed Ashley from the floor, forcing the Icon still in his hand into hers, before pushing them both down into the corresponding slot on the console. He did it all so quickly and fast that no one had time to react. "No Arbiter, the Great Journey has begun. And it shall be my kin, not the Sangheili that will be the Prophet's escort!"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>To the person who reviewed but said he didn't read the story (and only left the review to bring the number up to 117), bravo on you. I'd only wish I thought of that myself.

To everyone else, please do let me know what you think so far in the form of a review. And as always thanks for reading!

End  
file.